

What Holds Us Together? A Response to Daniel Simer O'Connell's "Unitarian Universalist Denominational Theology, 1993-1997"

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In an essay which hunted for "...a set of beliefs, statements that many Unitarian Universalists hold about what constitutes Unitarian Universalism...(or, in other words) UU doctrine..." Daniel Simer O'Connell evaluated what he called denominational theology.¹ His candidate for the post—after rejecting several possibilities—is evolutionary theology, an idea he got from Reverend Susan Pangerl who talks of our task of "...continually revisioning theology."

Like most members of the only US denomination named for a doctrine (and not one, but two at that) I also wonder, though often ironically, just what beliefs we hold in common. In the inaugural issue of JLR the lead essay presents a problem closely linked to the motive behind O'Connell's search for denominational theology—an identity crisis within our tradition, "At its simplest level, the identity crisis has to do with the problem of being able to say who we are."²

I take the underlying question in both essays to be: What holds us together? The answer is not denominational theology nor is it likely to be.

Let's take a brief look at denominations.

Denominations as such are an American phenomenon, so much a part of our cultural landscape, the background of our lives, that most Americans assume denominationalism is a world-wide reality. In fact, it is largely a result of American immigration which brought Germans who wanted to be Lutheran, Scotch-Irish and Scots who came here carrying the Presbyterian banner, many English who came as Methodists and some who came as Puritans, and, yes, of course, many who were of the Church of England which became the Protestant Episcopal Church of America. Other immigrants came here as Anabaptists from the Continent, Moravians and Reformed, too. Not to mention all those Irish and Italian Catholics.

Why would anyone want to emulate such artificial organizations, their genesis more often in national and ethnic loyalty as in any expression of "denominational" theology? They are an accident of history, and not a particularly good accident at that. Aspiring to denominationalism, which can be the only true rationale for a "denominational theology," means mimicking ecclesial organizations created by a collision of immigration, national and ethnic churches, and often, too, necessitated by exclusion of immigrant groups from the mainstream of American society.*

And here we come, I believe, to the nub of what Daniel Simer O'Connell's essay: "Unitarian Universalist Denominational Theology" attempted to address. We do not need to discover a denominational theology, sort of the lowest common denominator to which we can all nod yes, it's rarely been the glue among other US denominations; rather, we need to discover what created and sustains the liberal religious tradition itself.

What turn of mind or heart or soul created the human context within which those of us who claim the liberal religious tradition? If we can discover this turn, we might discover what unites such disparate UU communities as pagans, humanists, liberal Christians, Buddhists, and Jews. All of these groups want in, to be a part and not to be

excluded, but why do they care? What is there in the liberal religious tradition which makes it attractive to them in the first place?

It is not organizational ideology—denominational theology; I believe the glue is a religious orientation, what we might call a mental posture, a spiritual tendency, a particular kind of religious appetite, a temperament. It might be found through this kind of question, “Is there a Unitarian Universalist world view?” Here is one person’s interesting answer:

*We do not presume to be the only truth for anyone. Our religion is a process--a way--rather than an absolute belief. It is organic and changeable even as it always "is."*³

Ginger Luke asks herself this worldview question in an essay on the Essex Conversations carried in the same JLR issue as O’Connell’s essay. In these conversations religious educators asked, “As we enter the twenty-first century, what is the core of our evolving Unitarian Universalist faith?” as a starting point for their discipline’s work in the near future.

"We live ourselves into religious thinking, more than we think our way into religious living." As Ginger Luke suggests, Horace Bushnell points a way forward.

A contemporary expression of Bushnell’s insight comes from a prominent scholar of Islam, “It is customary nowadays to hold that there is in human life and society something distinctive called ‘religion’...I suggest that we might investigate our custom here, scrutinizing our practice of giving (religions) names and indeed of calling them religions.”⁴ This from a professor of the Comparative History of Religion at Harvard University and, for nine years, director of its Center for the Study of World Religions, Wilfred Cantwell Smith. His seminal work on religious studies, The Meaning and End of Religion, has a confounding, but helpful perspective.

He suggests that to reify religious traditions with names like Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism is to make a category mistake: There is no such thing as a Christianity, nor, more to the point here, I would suggest, is there such a thing as a Liberal Religion.

Instead, Smith calls for scholarly work to proceed along two separate, but intimately related fronts. First, he says, we must learn to study “cumulative religious traditions.” This means that we must develop what James Hopewell, in his anthropologically informed work, Congregation, calls thick description. Thick description of a tradition will include, according to one of Smith’s influential students “...texts of scripture or law, including narratives, myths, prophecies, accounts of revelations, and so forth.” Fiction and poetry, too, I would add. “It also includes visual and other kinds of symbols, oral traditions, music, dance, ethical teachings, theologies [note theology as only one of many items included], creeds, rites, liturgies, architecture...”⁵ Hopewell would expand the list to include the less formal, the ways of interacting among members and their communities, regional influences and inflections. James Fowler, Smith’s student, gives this summary of Smith’s cumulative religious tradition, in his work, Stages of Faith, which, coincidentally, received a substantive critique by Edward Piper in JLR Winter, 2002.

Second, and even more important to Smith, we must examine the lived faith of those in the religious tradition. (He says retaining the word religious and religious names

as adjectives is fine; it's turning them into nouns which confuses us.) James Fowler expanded Smith's second emphasis in his work on faith development. Without going into Piper's fine essay and helpful critique of Fowler, I will let him describe Smith's contribution: "Smith draws a sharp distinction between faith and belief. Belief he says, involves assenting intellectually to concepts or propositions as set forth in religious doctrines or creeds... Faith, on the other hand, is 'a quality of the person not the system.' Faith involves 'an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions.'⁶

This quick summary gives faint echo of the radical turn which Smith gives to the very question: What is a religious tradition and what holds it together? If this idea intrigues you, his work will repay close attention.

The answer to what holds us holds together will emerge if we pursue not denominational theology, but the kind of thick description which Smith suggests is necessary for understanding a religious tradition. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest a possible initiative, *The Meaning and End of the Liberal Religious Tradition*. This initiative would develop a thick description of the liberal religious tradition, and, pursue a broad investigation of how that tradition informs the faith of its members—and, in turn, is informed and changed by them. Without this kind of work we will continue to cast about in the realm of belief for what holds us together and forego the rich possibilities of our own lived faith and our long, vital liberal religious heritage.

*An addenda to the denominational material: theology and ecclesiology can and should be separated though they bear close relation. In our case I believe all the talk about the virtues of congregational polity and the "free church tradition" confuse questions of appropriate church governance and the role of the church—ecclesiology—with the more general question of what really holds us together, which, for lack of a better term, gets called theology.

H. Richard Niebhuur's book, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, does point to one answer to the question: What holds us together? Class. Though proposed for a different purpose, I believe UU President William Sinkford's sermon: "Where Race and Class Unite", makes essentially the same point: "Most of us are middle and upper middle class white folks with degrees from really good schools (the average education in our pews is at the Master's level)..." So, one thing we hold in common is socio-economic location and skin color. And it is no insignificant observation as Sinkford points out, but does it exhaust us as a group? We hope not, I know.

¹ O'Connell, Daniel Simer, "Unitarian Universalist Denominational Theology, 1993-1997 A Survey, Critique, and Articulation for the New Millennium"

http://www.meadville.edu/oconnell_3_1.html

² Rasor, Paul "The Self in Contemporary Liberal Religion"

http://www.meadville.edu/rasor_1_1.html

³ Luke, Ginger

http://www.meadville.edu/luke_3_1.html

⁴p. 15, Smith, Wilfred Cantwell. The Meaning and End of Religion. Minneapolis, MN. Fortress Press, 1991

⁵p. 11, Fowler, James. Stages of Faith. San Francisco, CA. Harper and Row, 1981

⁶Piper, Edward, **Faith Development: A Critique of Fowler's Model**
http://www.meadville.edu/piper_3_1.html

Also mentioned:

Hopewell, James. Congregation: Stories and Structures. Philadelphia, PA. Fortress Press, 1987

Niebuhr, H. Richard. The Social Sources of Denominationalism NYC, NY. Henry Holt and Co.