



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“The Monk’s Revolution”

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Centering Thoughts:

*Unless I am convinced by proofs from scriptures or by plain and clear reasons and arguments,
I can and will not retract, for it is neither safe nor wise to do anything against conscience.*

Martin Luther

*Is it not clear, according to Scripture, that the persecutors are generally wrong and the persecuted
are generally right; that the majority has ever been on the side of falsehood, and the minority on
that of truth? Truth in every age has caused an outcry.* Martin Luther

*What is a [hu]man born for but to be a reformer, a re-maker of what has been made,
a denouncer of lies, a restorer of truth and good?* Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sermon:

Our Unitarian Universalist Fifth Principle states that we affirm “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.” Last Sunday after the 11 am service, about 20 people attended “Conversations That Matter,” a discussion of our 5th Principle.

It was a respectful exchange of views and challenges about how our Fellowship makes decisions and just what utilizing the democratic process means. Among the several important outcomes I took from that gathering were how important this Fellowship is for many of you, and that you want clear opportunities to express your thoughts about the myriad activities and decisions that are made. I want that, too, especially since I don’t want you to follow Luther’s footsteps by posting your own 95 complaints on our front door!

The meeting we held might not have occurred had it not been for the movement Luther began. He helped people realize their own agency in religious matters by giving them a voice.

When Luther voiced his own opinions, although he was expressing his own conscience, he wasn’t advocating for individual religious liberty or the democratic process as we know it. He and other reformers wanted to rescue their religion from wrongful beliefs and practices because they believed souls were at risk. Not surprisingly, Roman Catholic leaders did not welcome any dissent. But because Luther felt so sure that the Church had strayed from scripture-based truth, he couldn’t stay silent.

One major abuse he saw was how the Church used the doctrine of salvation to enable people to reduce their time in Purgatory—an idea not based in scripture. By purchasing indulgences, or pardons for sins—and the more you bought the better—you could reduce your sinful debt. Not only could you buy indulgences for yourself, you could help relatives already dead by buying some for them! You could even buy pardons for sins you hadn't yet committed. What a system!

Johann Tetzel, the Pope's primary indulgence salesman, is accused of saying this little jingle to prospective buyers: "Every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." Luther referenced similar words in two of his theses, but there's no evidence Tetzel actually said this.

Luther thought this practice despicable because it meant God's forgiveness was for sale and that you could do something to assist your salvation. Luther believed scripture proved faith in God was all a sinner needed. Nothing you did in this life, not good works, not prayers, not donations, nothing could save your soul except faith. Faith alone, *sola fide*, was all one needed. To emphasize this point, Luther said, "The most damnable and pernicious heresy that has ever plagued the mind of men, was the idea that somehow he could make himself good enough to deserve to live with an all-holy God."

Additionally, if forgiveness could be dispensed for a price by the power of the Pope, Luther wondered why the Pope just didn't give automatic forgiveness to everyone for free. That the Church did not do this only confirmed that its underlying interest was in earthly monetary reward.

When Luther traveled to Rome and saw the opulence, extensive land holdings, and power wielded by the Prince of the Church, in contrast to the poor peasants who were being asked to buy their own salvation with what little money they had, he became determined to correct these and other errors.

Sermons, for example, were preached in Latin, making it impossible for the average peasant to understand. Priesthoods could be bought, and those priests were settled in churches without having any knowledge of Christianity and often where they couldn't speak the local language. Equally outrageous was the sale of relics supposedly of saints and even the divine family. Knucklebones, strands of hair, drops of blood and even thorns from Jesus' crown were bought at great price because they promised a greater chance for prayers to be answered. The lucrative relic trade was a market for gullible peasants made possible by fraudulent hucksters and avaricious religious authorities. Sadly, in an age when little was understood and life was precarious at best, purchasing hope for a better life overcame any doubt about the relic's authenticity or supernatural abilities.

Luther's complaints were met badly by the powers that be. In 1521 he was convicted of heresy and excommunicated. Forced to leave the Church and his calling as a monk, Luther eventually married and had children, claiming celibacy was not God's plan for humankind.

However, Luther's complaints were met well by the disenfranchised peasants. One significant idea he put forth empowered the people. If faith alone was enough for salvation, then intermediaries between God and people became unnecessary. Every believer became a priest with direct access to God. Although Luther saw a role for clergy, his views reduced their control over the people. We UU's inherited this idea. Ministers are called out of our congregations and ordained by them. We

have no magical powers unavailable to you, but we offer leadership based on our training and commitment.

In Alec Ryrie's new book, *Protestants*, the author identifies three basic principles the reformers helped establish and evident in our lives today: free inquiry, democracy, and what he calls apoliticism.

First, free inquiry encouraged the debate of religious ideas. By translating the Bible and preaching in the people's own language, Luther gave people tools to think for themselves and form their own opinions. They could also judge Church doctrine and traditions. This encouraged new ideas and a review of old ideas. Ryrie writes, "Slowly and reluctantly, one notion which a few radical Protestants put about—that religious difference and free speech ought to be accepted as matters of principle, rather than merely tolerated as unavoidable necessities—became a new orthodoxy." (*Protestants*, page 3)

Second, democracy meant participatory politics. Within five years of Luther's posting on the Church door, in 1524 German peasants rebelled against the nobles and the Church demanding more freedom and a voice in decisions that affected them. Like Luther, they courageously spoke out against the powerful.

Thirdly, apoliticism refers to the people's demand that the Church and nobles have limited control over the people's lives. They wanted a greater voice for the people and less intrusion from the powerful. Seeds of future revolutions were planted by the Reformation and Unitarian Universalism is an extreme beneficiary of their ideas.

Getting from Lutheranism to Unitarian and Universalism did not happen in a straight line. Roughly 50 years after Luther's initial public protest, the first Unitarian Church was founded, in 1568, in Transylvania, now Romania. Francis David and more radical reformers desired to bring doctrine even closer to scripture by ridding the church of the doctrine of the trinity—that God is three. Many 'god is one' Unitarians died for this perceived heresy. But it would be another 50 or so years before the reforming Puritans arrived in America, and not until the 1700s that Unitarians and Universalists would establish churches here.

Our tradition today would be unrecognizable to those reforming ancestors. In fact, when we meet with our sister Unitarian Church community in Oklánd, Transylvania, it's a bit like stepping back in time. The counter-reformation, or Catholic pushback on reforms, stopped their ability to continue reforming, a price Francis David paid for with his life. But in our religiously freer country, our UU traditions and theology have continued to change, or reform. And having been accused of heresy throughout the centuries, we long ago rejected tests of faith, a single doctrine for all, and the idea that revelation has ended or that new ideas must be rejected.

Besides these changes initiated by the Reformation, I think history has a warning to offer. The peasants rebelled because, in modern terminology, the noble 1% had all the money, power, and property, while the peasants had nothing.

We may be experiencing a similar rebellion in the way many voters express their disgust with establishment politicians. Many feel left behind by technology and globalization. Without wanting

to deconstruct the government, I believe voices on the political left and right are complaining that leaders in government aren't serving us well. As in Luther's time, self-interest and maintaining power in the hands of a few seems to be the operative guide. We need to hold leaders accountable.

In closing, I want to share a concern. Last week the Hungarian Unitarian Synod voted to define marriage as only between a man and a woman. This conservative turn saddens me because it goes against our UU values that all people should be treated equally—values we hoped they shared. Those of us on our Partner Church Committee wonder how this will impact our relationship with Oklánd. Will they welcome our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or intersexed pilgrims? Will they change as we have changed our views on marriage equality? These are open questions we will continue to ponder.

Reform and change often come with a price, though in America, not usually the cost of our lives. Unitarian Universalism remains a marginalized minority religious tradition out of synch with a primarily Christian culture. But we will continue to speak our truths and our values against the majority. And, just as I expect we will be in dialogue with our Transylvanian partners over our differences, I know we will continue to be in dialogue among ourselves over our own differences.

I trust that the 5th Principle will continue to be alive and well at the Fellowship. May it be so for centuries to come.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Unitarian Universalism continually reforms itself and would be unrecognizable to our Unitarian or Universalist ancestors. Do you welcome ongoing change and what do you think this tradition will look like in fifty, one hundred or five hundred years from now?
2. How do you interpret sacred scripture from various world religions? What meaning do you find in the Christian story?
3. What source or religious authority best offers you wisdom or a guide for your living?