

Homily: Classism Among Unitarian Universalists

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June 5, 2011

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As Unitarian Universalists, we aspire to inclusive. Our first principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person – an idea that should appeal to everyone, regardless of social or economic class. The other six of our seven principles have similar class-**LESS** appeal.

On the other hand, we take pride in our elite history, which has prompted some to accuse us of "classism" – that is, prejudice or discrimination based on social or economic class.

The tension between classism and universal appeal has deep roots in UU history. It's a tension that deserves serious thought, discussion and action in our own congregation as we look forward to our future during our current search for a new settled minister.

How does this tension manifest itself? Consider that many Unitarian Universalists assume their congregations belong in prosperous communities where the grass is greener and the children, in Garrison Keillor's phrase, are "all above average." But this assumption exists alongside our part-defensive, part-optimistic ideology of genuine diversity. Consider also that we aspire to be democratic and inclusive, but we are comforted by our litany of influential and prestigious forebears.

So we find ourselves torn between who is actually sitting in our sanctuary and who we wish were sitting here. And, at a minimum, we must wonder, Do we have a problem of defacto classism – even though we aspire to be inclusive?

Before proceeding, I acknowledge I am indebted to two books published by the UUA's Skinner House for much of the factual content of this homily. One of those books, published a few months ago, is titled *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*, written by UU minister Mark Harris. The other book, published in 2008, is *The Fellowship Movement: A Growth Strategy and its Legacy*, written by UU layperson Holley Ulbrich. As I proceed, I will draw from those two sources without further attribution.

As an example of how class can impact on UU churches, consider the example of First Parish UU Church in Watertown, Massachusetts, adjacent to Cambridge. Founded in 1630 by Puritan Englishmen, it is one of the five oldest UUA congregations. The founding "white Anglo-Saxon Protestants" and their descendants helped form many congregations that eventually became the nucleus of an established church, whose membership exercised enormous economic, political, social, and educational influence in Massachusetts.

The Watertown congregation itself was home to members of the Coolidge family; the radical Unitarian minister Theodore Parker; U.S. Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Curtis; and Lydia Maria Child, the abolitionist remembered for the song, "Over the River and Through the Wood." Other members included business leaders, artists, authors, and other cultural and societal movers and shakers.

In the 19th century, however, the demographics of Watertown changed dramatically. The city became more industrial and urban and was flooded with immigrants, and First Parish declined. The UU values of diversity and inclusiveness that we celebrate today were uncommon then, and Unitarians led the flight to the suburbs. Today, Watertown's First Parish survives, but in greatly diminished form, and only because of some evangelistic efforts unprecedented by UU standards.

The Watertown story illustrates a stereotype that Unitarian Universalists are all well-educated and in the middle class or above. That is not entirely true – nationally, surveys show that many

Unitarian Universalists live in marginal economic circumstances or do not have college educations. But Unitarian and Universalist history reveals the stereotype has old and very real roots. On a more positive note, that history also shows efforts by some of our forebears to reach beyond the elite.

A very casual look at Unitarian history might cause pride in the fact that mid-19th-century Unitarians controlled almost all the educational, social, economic, and political power in Boston. The same casual look might also mislead us to think that Unitarianism has always been liberal – not only theologically, but in literature, politics, and social action. However, a closer look reveals that Unitarian dominance of Boston at that time is harder to celebrate.

The three major religious groups in Boston then were Episcopal, Congregational, and Unitarian, and the latter were most likely to enjoy political and economic power. In the first generation after the Revolutionary War, Unitarian churches included a large membership of farmers, but this changed rapidly as the economy grew.

By the 1830s Unitarians made most of the decisions that shaped the city's economy. Compared to other denominations, they had 22 times more lawyers, 20 times the number of bankers, twice as many merchants, and 28 times the number of manufacturers – but they had almost no farmers, craftsmen, or industrial workers. In 1850, two-thirds of the wealthiest Bostonians were Unitarians. By 1870, the average Unitarian was thirteen times richer than the average member of any other denomination, and Boston Unitarians were almost entirely upper-middle and upper class.

They used their power to dominate Boston's intellectual and philanthropic organizations and shaped those organizations to fit their exclusive, conservative, and business-oriented values – not to address social ills. They established a number of cultural institutions, but they often kept them private. For example, the Boston Athenaeum, an independent library and museum, was closed to public use by the "rabble."

Harvard College is perhaps the best example of this growth of private institutions. Harvard's expansion was funded by wealthy, politically conservative but theologically liberal families. From 1805 to 1860, 33 of 36 members elected to the Harvard Corporation were Unitarians. Eighty percent of faculty members were Unitarian. By the mid-1850s the student body was 75% Unitarian. The children of the well-to-do commonly chose to attend Harvard, but poor people couldn't afford it. Harvard students trained to achieve a class status that would keep them from mixing with the rabble.

Harvard even established its own church after lower class congregations, including Universalists, invaded Cambridge. Harvard's church leaders strove for gentlemanly qualities and regularly denounced the vulgar and the disorderly – labels they applied first to rural people and later to immigrants.

However, not every Unitarian church or minister shared this devotion to upper-class values. The Rev. Arthur Buckminster Fuller, pastor of the New North Church in Boston, tried to make the Unitarian church appealing to all social classes. The New North Church was in a changing neighborhood eventually dominated by immigrant Italian Catholics. Rather than abandon the neighborhood, he tried to expand the church and established a sabbath school which took in destitute children. A Baptist colleague called Fuller a "friend of the poor and the outcast." Fuller believed that workers, farmers, and other common folk would flock to Unitarianism if they received its message in their own simple language. He was also an advocate of many of the liberal reform movements of his day, including temperance, abolitionism, and public education.

The Rev. Joseph Tuckerman provides another example of early Unitarian concern for the poor. His ministry began as the Ministry at Large in 1826 and continues to this day as the Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry. Tuckerman decried the practice of pew ownership by the well-to-do, which relegated the poor to a tiny space where they were isolated in church as "the class of the poor." He visited the homes of the poor and constructed the first chapel for the poor at Friend Street. Although he was concerned that separate congregations for the poor would reinforce class structure, the chapels created by the Ministry at Large became important community centers for Boston's poor.

Fuller's and Tuckerman's efforts, however, were viewed with distaste by conservative Unitarians. To them, the idea of the poor agitating for power was dangerous. For example, the famous Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing believed the alleged hardships of working class people were exaggerated. The poor were better off than lawyers and merchants, he argued, because they did not aspire as high and therefore would be less liable to disappointment when they failed.

Channing exemplified the then-current ethic of Unitarianism – that of the self-made man. He and others like him believed poverty was caused by the poor's lack of a frugal, disciplined, and individualistic work ethic. The self-help literature of the time focused on the development of character, and Unitarian clergy were among the most prominent self-help writers. Channing and other conservative Unitarians wanted to morally elevate the masses to their level and believed that those who would pit classes against each another threatened the stability of society.

Turning now to the Universalists, they had a broader base than the early Unitarians. Universalists came from all walks of economic life. In general, they occupied the middle ground economically. They were not the poorest religious group – generally the Baptists were – but neither were they the wealthiest group. Universalists tended to be property owners, but their holdings were concentrated in the middle of property assessment lists, and few were especially wealthy. They tended to be representative of the diversity in their communities.

Quoting one church historian, "It is not that Universalists were never learned or rich. They often became so. While an intelligent Unitarian went to Harvard or some other prestigious school, by right of birth, a bright Universalist, through luck and hard work, might get into a more modest educational institution. More often, the bulk of a Universalist's culture was achieved almost entirely through his or her own effort. Unitarians, at least in New England, inherited their churches from generations past. With very few exceptions Universalists created their own societies and built their own meetinghouses." End quote.

Though many Universalists were self-made men, capitalism caused deep divisions in Universalism. Universalist George Pullman was a railroad magnate who cut jobs and increased working hours, precipitating the violent "Pullman Strike" of 1894. While some Universalists supported exploitative business practices like those of Pullman, many others fought against injustices, especially those involving women and children. A number of Universalists were involved in passing child labor laws.

As time marched on, by the end of the 19th century, Universalists and Unitarians were more and more similar, foreshadowing their later union. In 1899, a Universalist writer noted that a convergence had occurred between the two groups with respect to class, scholarship, and theology. You could not tell the difference between the two, Willard Selleck observed, except that Universalists were more interested in theology and things spiritual and that a conservative Universalist might be uncomfortable around a radical Unitarian.

In 1948, the American Unitarian Association, or AUA, launched the Fellowship Movement, which continued until 1967, six years after the Unitarians and Universalists united in forming the UUA. The Fellowship Movement was a growth strategy that aimed to plant small, autonomous, lay-

led congregations just about everywhere 10 or more religious liberals could be gathered together. The tireless Monroe Husbands was hired by the AUA to head the program and traveled extensively around the country organizing Unitarian – and later UU – churches and fellowships.

Some credit the Fellowship Movement with saving Unitarian Universalism from extinction. Today some 40 percent of the hundreds of lay-led congregations seeded from Cape Cod to Alaska and from Minnesota to the Virgin Islands survive in some form. Moreover, 30 percent of the UUA's current congregations were started as such fellowships. In fact, the Fellowship Movement gestated our own congregation, with Monroe Husbands in attendance at the birth.

But from a class standpoint, the Fellowship Movement had a downside. It tended to concentrate its efforts on middle-class and upper-middle-class, well-educated communities – and particularly college communities like Columbia which were almost always more politically and religiously liberal than surrounding areas. The result is that many UU churches today have a preponderance of well-educated congregants who are mostly middle class and above, with very few members from lower socio-economic groups – and, dare I add, not very many non-white members.

Unsurprisingly, our congregation is not exempt from this profile. A survey done about seven years ago found that 27% of our members had bachelor's degrees, 28% had master's degrees, and 37% had advanced degrees. We are currently doing a congregational survey for our ministerial search, and preliminary returns indicate that the respondents are 95% white, and that 26% have a bachelor's degree, 31% have a master's degree, and 37% have an advanced degree. Further, only 15% of respondents have reported a household income of less than \$50,000, whereas 60% say their household income is between \$50,000 and \$100,000, and 20% report a household income of more than \$100,000.

There are some who say that because Unitarian Universalism is a rational, searching faith, it only appeals to well-educated, well-situated individuals, which explains the demographic composition of our congregation and others. I say that attitude is demeaning and inaccurate because there are intelligent, curious people in all strata of society. I also say it is a defeatist attitude which leads to complacency, becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and flies in the face of our expressed ideals and principles.

And so, as I said near the beginning of this homily, we find ourselves torn between who is actually sitting in our sanctuary and who we wish were sitting here – **IF** we are to fulfill our ideal of universal appeal.

I don't pretend to know how we can reach out and gather in a broader spectrum of our community, but I believe it is a discussion we must have and act upon if we are to remain true to our class-**LESS** aspirations as we move toward our future with a new minister.