

Engaging Our Theological Diversity Discussion

9/8/21

Present: Finley Campbell, Marie Cobbs, Bobbi Lammers-Campbell, Ellen LaRue, Allan Lindrup

Chalice Lighting:

words from Mark Mosher DeWolfe

Light in our hearts a candle of hope and a beacon of vision, as we light this candle to symbolize the flame of freedom, the light of love, the beacon of truth.

*May this candle burn in our lives in the days ahead,
a symbol of the free faith which is the guide of our lives.*

Reflections from last discussion:

- It seems that some people get hung up on words like “religion” and “theology”. In a parallel way I object to the words “white supremacy” being applied to the UUA. So, I can understand that using an old word with new meaning does not sit well, and therefore I will search for other words to use. But “philosophy” is not the same thing.
- Since the word “theology” has created such a fuss, we may be on the right track.
- I am still puzzled that some humanist friends insist on characterizing “theology” and “religion” as necessarily dealing with the supernatural.

Question 1 – The Commission on Appraisal says it is critical for congregations to understand their identity to be more than a club, a social-action organization, or a surrogate family. Is First U more than any one or all of these: What more is there here?

- It is no accident that social justice is at the margins of the congregation. We like to see ourselves as family or koinonia-like rather than as a group driven by moral behavior. This can become cliquish and family (with a small “f”)-oriented.
- I think of First U as a social-activist organization or community. I believe that to be organized socially to create a better world is the highest order that we can aspire to.
- We do have a social aspect, but we also have, left over from our protestant (and Catholic) traditions, a need to do something useful in the world. I sense a longing

for something deeper. When we have such a deep sermon, people talk about it with excitement. We need more of this. The social aspects are fine, but we have a longing for more.

- Smaller congregations do have a family element and individuals that support each other in their times of need, but we also come together because of our shared principles, which we strive to promote. People may be in the church for theological inspiration, but that is probably not what we encounter most often.
- I feel the social aspect is most important, and that most of the congregation is not interested in things like the Criminal Justice series of first forums we had a couple of years ago. On the other hand, we still have active spiritual pluralism groups – humanists and Christians.
- We came to the church initially because it appeared it was engaged in social justice. But it appears that engagement in social justice depends mainly on external forces and the ideology of the ministers. Our engagement around the Iraqi war was a high point. The church itself is a family phenomenon. I myself have been the scapegoat in that “family” structure, which included a father and mother and a group of people that felt like each had to choose sides in the quarrel. We are going to have to overcome this if we are going to become a value-driven church.
- I came to the church because I felt activism in the church and the denomination. At first, I did not come to services, but eventually I did although I was touched by few of the sermons. I have stayed in large part because of the good people I have met whom I feel are fully invested in social justice pursuits. If we go back to “church” as we are discussing, it might not include me. However, the interim minister has said some interesting things. I and others are waiting to see what the congregation’s reaction will be the Humanist forums that have been scheduled.
- The remarks are very interesting, especially the ones about “family.” It seems that a family type church will doom us.
- From a membership perspective, viewing ourselves like a family is deadly; it is not welcoming to others who come in and feel they are not part of the family. This is most often a problem in small congregations, although it is not inevitable that a small congregation needs to view itself like a family.

Question 2 – Are the Humanist Manifesto and the views of David Bumbaugh expressed in “The Marketing of Liberal Religion” compatible? (Point of information: Bumbaugh was one of the signers of the Humanist Manifesto)

- Bumbaugh’s “poem to the universe” in his speech carries the implication that there is a sense of where humans are heading, that there is a cosmic destiny and that something is pushing it. Humanism can give a sense of the transcendental, which the Humanist Manifesto does not reflect.
- The documents are saying basically the same thing although one is dry and the other poetic. The poetic version has a sense of morality, goodness, and the idea of a

positive force in the universe, which is lacking in the Manifesto. I don't think the universe itself has a particularly positive essence. Humans must coordinate or cooperate to create a positive essence. We are a product of evolution, which is a kind of driving force. Animals can exhibit a sense of responsibility or cooperation that is instinctive. Plants can help each other. Cooperation fosters survival and becomes an evolutionary force, and at some point, humans can choose to become part of that. So, in that sense there is a positive force in the universe because humans have chosen that path.

- I totally agree that morality is based on human experience. Humans also learn to experience and hold things in awe, especially things they didn't understand. As we understood more, we held less in awe, but we still hold the universe in awe. Humans learned how to cooperate but not necessarily in a religious sense.
- The Humanist Manifesto is dry and secular; it is not inspiring. But Bumbaugh does see an initial creative force, so he gives a spiritual theological connection that speaks to me. It is written in a way other UUs could connect to it. It is much more spiritual and connects to bigger things than just humans, which is critical for religion.
- Agree with the discussion on evolution except that we go astray when we start to anthropomorphize. Plants don't "help" each other although they interact in such a way that all the members of a community can survive. Survival is the success of evolution. In human history the early interactions of human communities are what first produced religion – the way in which people of like ideas relate to each other.
- The human species survived because of cooperation, but elements of their cooperative behavior became coopted in "religion."
- The history of thoughts of "god" confirmed there was something else at work besides just human activity. According to Karl Marx, this force was the mode of production; for historical theists, it is god working through history. There is a celebratory element in cooperation – in a job well done such as the bringing in of the grain. Religion emerges from the celebration of community rather than just "doing it." It emerges from community; it is not imposed upon it.
- I have qualms about the eventual invocation of supernatural reasons for great deeds.
- Supernatural describes the unexplained – like a miracle. I think we can live with these different understandings.
- Gospel music sounds good to me and gives me goosebumps as does the singing of jazz musicians. This comes from an appreciation of good music – not from god.

Question 3: In terms of James Fowler's model of stages of faith development, COA speculates that UUs are moving from stage 4 to 5 (from individuation and independence to interdependence and openness to integrating wisdom from many sources). Do we meet the needs of our children and youth, who presumably need to move through the first 3 stages ("A small child begins with an unformed chaotic world view, stage one, moving in early childhood to one structured by outside authority, stage two. In stage three, "conventional faith," the community defines the

individual's worldview.”)

- Many people stay at stage 3 with their religion, and that works out fine. UUs may go beyond this. Does a child need to go through all the stages and if the child is not provided a worldview when she/he is ripe to receive it does the child go somewhere else to obtain their worldview? How many DREs are actually trained UUs? When I worked with the RE bridging program, all the youth who came out of it declared themselves to be atheists and none had any idea of what they were going to replace god with. They had learned that god does not exist. None declared they were a UU. We need to give them a structure to rebel against. How can we defend a program from which none of the consumers adopt UUism. For example – all the children of one of our most active members adopted the Serbian Orthodoxy of their mother.
- How would an ideal UU RE program be adopted? What would be the goal? – to know UU history, understand the meanings of the words we use, look at all our sources.
- I was raised a UU youth and stayed with the church. It gave me inspiration. And I have taught UU RE. I think our programs all the child to make their own decisions and give them a framework that is open to inspiration. I don't see a problem with the programs themselves.
- But you had supplemental youth programs in that period of time.
- None of my children adopted my social activism. Children tend to rebel against what their parents do.

Next meeting we will consider the first half of the chapter on theology pp. 66-82 “The Key Questions” and James Luther Adams “A Faith for the Free.”

Closing words from Steve J. Crump

That which is worthy of doing, create with your hands.

That which is worthy of repeating, speak with a clear voice.

That which is worthy of remembering, hold in your hearts.

And that which is worthy of living, go and live it now.

P.s., What I was thinking re plants “helping” each other: An example would be that in some communities of trees, a tree in trouble, say from a disease or parasite, will emit chemicals of some kind, prompting surrounding trees to send out chemicals that fight disease or infestation. Apparently its done through the roots, and perhaps in conjunction with other living agents such as mycorrhizae. No consciousness involved, yet one organism benefits from the functioning of surrounding organisms. Quite a different situation from minerals, water and air on their own.