

“ A Celebration of Ambiguity”
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First Universalist Society
Central Square NY
June 5, 2017

THE READING

from “Protestantism and the Quest for Certainty”

Peter Berger

Christian Century Magazine, August 26, 1998

Throughout most of history human beings have lived in situations in which there was general consensus on the nature of reality and on the norms by which one should lead one’s life. This consensus was almost everywhere grounded in religion and it was taken for granted. The pluralistic situation necessarily changes this, for reasons that are not at all mysterious. They have to do with the basic fact that we are social beings and that our view of reality is shaped by socialization, first in childhood and later in the relationships of adult life. Where socialization processes are uniform, this view of reality is held with a high degree of taken-for-granted certainty. Pluralism ensures that socialization processes are *not* uniform and, consequently, that the view of reality is much less firmly held.

Put differently, certainty is now much harder to come by. People may still hold the same beliefs and values that were held by their predecessors in more uniform situations, but they will hold them in a different manner: what before was given through the accident of birth now becomes a matter of *choice*. Pluralism brings on an era of many choices and, by the same token, an era of uncertainty. . . .

There are individuals who thrive on a situation in which nothing can be taken for granted, in which they are faced with a multitude of choices. Perhaps they could be called the virtuosi of pluralism. But for most people the situation makes for a great deal of unease. This response may derive from profound aspects of human nature. There is what John Dewey has called “the quest for certainty”—certainty at least when it comes to the most important questions of life. The clash between the built-in uncertainty of the pluralistic situation and the urge for at least a measure of certainty helps explain a rather curious phenomenon in contemporary culture—the alternation of relativism and absolutist claims to truth. . . .

If we know something, there is no reason to believe; conversely, if we say that we believe something, we are implying that we don’t know. A world that is taken for granted is one in which people *know* (more accurately, think they know) what is true; they don’t have to *believe*. Putting the contradiction in this way, one must then ask: Just what do we know when it comes to religion?

There are people, of course, who claim to have certain knowledge when it comes to their religious affirmations. If one assumes that God exists, one must inevitably concede the possibility that he has disclosed himself to some human beings more directly than to others. The scriptures of the great religious traditions contain in large part the testimony of such people. For them, terms like “belief” or “faith” make little sense, at least not in the sense these

terms have for the rest of us; they *know* what they are saying. Most of us (and, needless to say, I include myself in this large, religiously undistinguished company) find ourselves in a very different situation. Whether we like it or not, if we are honest, religion for us cannot be based on knowledge, only on belief. The question is how we cope with this situation. Can we live with it?

The dialectic between relativism and the competing claims to absolute truth is ongoing. In every nihilist there is a fanatic screaming to get out, and conversely every fanatic is a potential nihilist. Most people, of course, are neither fanatics nor nihilists; for them, the dialectic plays itself out in less extreme forms. . . .

I will allow myself a more personal observation here. Some time ago I made a discovery that somewhat surprised me: I found that I could communicate much better with people who disagreed with me but who were uncertain about their position than with people who agreed with me but who held our shared views in a posture of certainty. This was so in matters of political or other secular relevance, but also, emphatically, in matters of religious belief. This led me to a fantasy of a sort of ecumene of troubled souls (I like to call them "the uncertainty-wallahs"). But it also led me to look again at the impact of pluralism on contemporary religion

As far back as 1972 Dean Kelley, in his book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, outlined the traits of what he called "strong religion." These traits are a firm allegiance by the members of a "strong" church to its beliefs, to the point of risking persecution; a willingness to submit to the discipline of the church body; and an eagerness to convince others through missionary activity. Needless to say, in American Protestantism Kelley found these traits markedly present in the evangelical communities and markedly absent in the mainline churches. This contrast, he argued, explains why the former are growing and the latter are not.

In the years since the early 1970s the remarkable growth of evangelicalism and the decline of the mainline churches have given credence to Kelley's argument, even though it has been shown that the growth of evangelicalism had a lot to do with a higher birth rate among its members rather than with an influx of converts, and even though the decline in mainline Protestantism appears to have reached a plateau more recently. (One may observe in passing that an interesting bit of "anti-Kelley" data comes from the robust growth of Unitarian-Universalist churches in recent years—a community that can hardly be called "strong" in the aforementioned sense!)

[note: Actually, UU Churches have lost significant ground in the years since Berger made that observation. Our "robust growth" has become significant loss as a percentage of the US population. I believe the evidence suggests that our loss of members has largely been to "no church" rather than to "strong" churches].

THE SERMON

[Who are the Evangelicals?]

This sermon will deliver, I hope, on its intent to be a “Celebration of Ambiguity,” but the route it is going to take will not be a direct one.

It begins with the opportunity I had in Chautauqua several years ago, to hear a first rate series of five lectures on American Evangelical religion by Randall Balmer. Balmer, who was raised an Evangelical, told the audience about when his mother heard the news of the Six Day War in the Middle East and came out to tell her son to stop playing and to get ready because this was a sign that Jesus was coming any moment. Balmer has serious Evangelical credentials. He also has serious academic credentials: he has a PhD from Princeton and teaches at Barnard College and is an adjunct professor at Union Theological Seminary. He has written several books and produced documentaries on religion for Public Television. He has the look of a tv anchor, and speaks with warmth and clarity. During his education he went through an agnostic phase, but now identifies himself as an Episcopalian. While he is no longer an Evangelical, his affection for his roots is clear and he spoke not as a critic, but more as a guide into unfamiliar territory.

Most of us know relatively little about Evangelicals, except as stereotypes. The reality is that Evangelicals make up about 30% of the population of the United States. Unitarian Universalists represent something less than 6/100 of 1% of the population - which is to say that there are something like 460 Evangelicals for every Unitarian Universalist. Bill Moyers suggested that in the South there are more Southern Baptists than there are people.

What is an Evangelical? It is not a monolithic movement. Historically, the followers of Martin Luther were called Evangelicals because of his emphasis on a return to the gospels of the Evangelists as a way of reforming the Roman Church which he believed had strayed too far from early Christianity. In this country, Balmer suggested that Evangelicalism was the fusion of two strands - Pietism and the remnants of Puritanism. It represented a desire to restore what he called “warm hearted piety” to religion - “affections as well as intellect.” It was, therefore, a reaction against our spiritual ancestors. This was the stuff of the First and Second Great Awakenings - the revival movements in Pre and Post Revolutionary America.

Balmer cited two criteria for differentiating Evangelicals: they take seriously the importance of a conversion or “born again” experience - the sense of entering a new life; and they take the Bible seriously to the point of trying to interpret it literally. He broke the movement down into several components.

[Fundamentalists]

So-called “Fundamentalists” date back to the publishing of a series of pamphlets written by conservative scholars between 1910 and 1915 to testify to what they believed were the fundamental truths of Christianity, which they saw being threatened by modernism. By Balmer's description, “a Fundamentalist is an Evangelical who is mad about something.”

[Neo-Evangelicals]

Neo-Evangelicals are people who believe in being born again and in the primacy of the Bible, but who are willing to adapt their message to “the prevailing cultural idioms.” Billy Graham, Robert Schuler, and the ministers of the Willow Creek mega-church near Chicago (at which something like 15,000 people worship every Sunday) are examples of neo-Evangelicalism.

[Holiness]

The "Holiness" movement traces itself back to John Wesley. It began as a passionate religious movement that wanted to reform and revitalize the Methodist and other churches. They did not believe in preachers being trained in seminary because it made them too intellectual and separated them from the common people. They couldn't find any reference in the scriptures to organs or robed choirs. These were the people who began the camp meetings as a way of stirring up religious enthusiasm. When the Methodist Bishops excluded them, they left and started their own churches, like the Church of the Nazarene.

[Pentecostals]

The Pentecostals grew out of the Holiness Movement. On January 1 of 1900, Agnes Osmond, a student at Bethel Bible College in Topeka, began to speak in tongues - to testify in a language that no one could understand and which no one (but, she insisted, the Holy Spirit) had taught her. Originally, the Pentecostals (whose name comes from the Pentecost described in the Book of Acts when people speaking different languages were suddenly empowered by the Holy Spirit to speak one language which all could understand), included women and blacks - William Seymour, a Black waiter, was one of the people who helped spread it. They moved from those positions. In recent years, in a rather stirring confession, the Assemblies of God, which are one of the major institutional manifestations of Pentecostalism today, renounced its drift into racism - sexism is still ok.

[Charismatics]

The Charismatic movement, which developed in the last half of the 20th century, represents people who are similar in their beliefs to Pentecostals, but who remain in mainline churches (Episcopal, Presbyterian, even Roman Catholic) in hopes of reinvigorating them with the Holy Spirit.

Balmer suggested that the Southern Baptists are a category all their own, given their size and influence. The Southern Baptists were, until the 70's, a rather broad, non-creedal movement, but they have experienced a Fundamentalist takeover by people who decided they could not live with the liberalism espoused by some of their members.

During the course of his lectures on the Evangelicals, Balmer helped his listeners gain some insight into the ways in which Evangelicals viewed the world, without in any sense trying to convert us to that view.

["The Apostle"]

Early in the week, Balmer was asked his view of the 1997 Robert Duvall film, the Apostle, about which he raved. That film really provided the affective underpinnings to Balmer's lectures.

25 years earlier, Duvall was in an off-Broadway play in which he had the role of a guy from Hughes, Arkansas. He went to Hughes, to see if there really was such a place, and since there wasn't much to do there, he went to the little church. The memory of their "joyful air of worshiping" stayed with him over the years, and he began to work on a script for a movie about that kind of church.

It was not your typical commercial film about Evangelicals - actually Holiness or Pentecostals - because there was no attempt to ridicule or depict their clergy as con-men.

The film, which is available on cable and through Amazon, and which I highly recommend, had very little plot. It was really a character study. The major producers and distributors had no interest in making Duvall's film, so he wrote, directed, starred, produced,

and invested his own \$5 million in it.

The film's about a Pentecostal preacher, E.F. "Sonny" Dewey, who is sincere, but far from pure. His wife ends up leaving him for his youth minister. When they conspire successfully to also take his church away from him, he is infuriated. He tries to see his kids at a Little League game, and the Youth Minister gets in his face. He picks up a bat and clobbers the guy, who is brain-damaged, goes into a coma, and eventually dies.

Sonny leaves Fort Worth, without knowing where he is going, dumps his car, fakes his death, and baptizes himself as "the Apostle E.F." He ends up in a little town in Louisiana called Bayou Boutte, where he decides to build a new ministry. He makes a connection with a retired black Holiness preacher, Brother Blackwell who has retired because his fragile health cannot sustain the passionate preaching in which he had engaged. (I still remember one of the services I attended in a Black church in Rockford many years ago during Black History Week, in which I thought the preacher was in the midst of a stroke or heart attack and kept thinking I should leap to my feet and call an ambulance before he collapsed. I discovered that this was only what was expected of a "real" preacher in that setting.)

Brother Blackwell takes The Apostle to his deserted old church and the Apostle sets out to clean it up and build it up as The One Way to Heaven Church. He barter his abilities as an auto mechanic in exchange for free radio air time, and he builds a congregation. Ultimately, his former wife accidentally hears him on the radio (in a way which makes no real sense to me - the signals of dumpy 1,000 watt radio stations like the one he was on do not carry that far - unless it was a miracle.) The police arrive at his church and arrest him and the film ends with his preaching to a chain gang.

The plot is not the film. The film is really about the passion and the commitment and the rightness of what the Apostle does for and with the people of his congregation. Somehow, Duvall managed to get way beyond the "look at the weird stuff those people are doing" to a point where, without exactly admiring him, we are able to appreciate what the preacher and his congregation share. Duvall told one interviewer that he sought to create "a guy who is, for better or for worse, a complete human being, who always believes he's called to do something good. So he's not a bad guy. He's a good guy, with failings like anyone."

Most of the reviewers deemed The Apostle a work of genius. The religious reviewers appreciated it - like Ted Baehr, the editor in chief of a biblical guide to movies who said that "Duvall's portrait of God-loving men and women stands out in this day and age when there is a tendency for movies to make a mockery of passionate men and women of God."

What Duvall did was just what he intended - to share with us a piece of the real religious world with which some of us in what we consider the cultural mainstream, have little contact. He illustrated powerfully some of the emotional dimensions of the world of which Randall Balmer spoke. When the reviewer at the Sacramento Bee asked him if he had any divine revelations after making "The Apostle":

Duvall closed his eyes and didn't speak for a few seconds. "... Yeah, I think so," he said. "I want people to see it and maybe it'll bless some people and touch 'em. We all have our individual journeys from the cradle to the grave, and maybe one of my best contributions will be this film."

I felt touched and blessed by seeing the film and I highly recommend it to you.

["Quest for Certainty"]

The world of the Evangelicals is a world of absolutes and few doubts. It is not a world of greys, but one of sharp blacks and whites. "This is right. This is wrong." God is not a matter of debate, the existence of God does not need to be proven: the existence of God is a given.

As Peter Berger pointed out in our reading, William James suggested a century ago that

there is, among many human beings, a “Quest for Certainty” – a desire to be sure that we know the truth. Now that is a tricky thing to maintain in our modern world. It was much easier when the world in which people lived was smaller - where most of the people with whom they came in contact were people who looked like them and thought like them.

[diversity]

Even in those seemingly simpler times, there was diversity. Even in John Calvin's Geneva, a city organized around a church, the stranger Michael Servetus, came to town - a young Spanish Physician who was one of the first to write about the circulation of the blood in the human body, and also a religious thinker who believed that the theological concept of the trinity [a three person god] was not supported by the scriptures. Calvin burned Servetus at the stake.

Martin Luther spoke with passion about the priesthood of every believer, until he began to see people who believed things that were different from what he believed, and that was unacceptable.

History tells us that in every time and every place, there have always been people who have not been willing or able to conform to the common perspective about religion. They have challenged the status quo. They have asked questions that were not welcome. Common during the Rockford Church's introductory sessions for prospective members, when people told how they came to be interested in Unitarian Universalism, were stories of how they were the kids in Sunday Schools who asked the questions which made the teachers uncomfortable. Those “virtuosi of pluralism,” to whom Berger also referred as “uncertainty-wallahs,” are not happy in nor welcome in those “strong” churches Dean Kelley wrote about. Is there anywhere they can go and be honest about their disbelief? “Praise the Lord,” there is. That is our specialty. That is what Unitarian Universalist churches are about. We are a collection of those troublemakers who disrupted their Sunday Schools by asking the unwelcome questions - who reveled in the late night debates about religion in college dorms. We believe that the data on religious truths is ambiguous - it is not all in - we cannot be too sure.

But, do we really?

[Fowler's Stages]

In those introductory sessions for potential members of the Rockford Church, one of the instruments we used as a discussion prompter was a survey which translates the “Stages of Religious Development” of James Fowler. I found this summary of Fowler's theory on the internet. It did not indicate who the author of the summary was.

[<https://faithforthought.wordpress.com/2012/07/12/james-fowlers-faith-development-theory/>]

In Fowler's theory, the first stage of primal faith emerges in the very first months of life. This is a pre-language faith in which the infant forms a rudimentary faith based on the infant's relationship with his or her parents. This “faith” is a trust in the parents for care and mutuality of regard which offsets separation anxiety in infant development.

In the second stage of intuitive-projection in early childhood, the child acquires language and engages in a high level of imagination and fantasy. Not yet controlled by logical thinking, the child has little capacity to separate fantasy from fact.

Representations of God begin to form based on experiences with parents and other adults who were significant in their childhood.

In the third stage of mythical-literal development, the child begins to think

logically (concrete-operational thinking) and is able to discern fact from fantasy. Children in this stage begin to take on the content of faith from a wider range of

authority figures than previously, including their parents, significant adults, teachers and religious leaders.

The fourth stage of synthetic-conventional typically emerges in early adolescence and signifies the beginning of the ability to use abstract ideas and concepts to understand the world around them (formal operational thinking). The individual's "faith" becomes susceptible to the shaping influence of societal norms and accepted groups or structures. The adolescents also develop interpersonal multi-perspective cognitions and begin to desire a personal relationship with God in which they feel loved in a deep and comprehensive way.

The fifth stage of individuative-reflective development typically occurs in a person's early twenties, thirties and forties and requires a significant critical analysis of one's values and beliefs. Prior to this stage, the individual may have had an uncritical acceptance of others' beliefs as the basis of their own beliefs. In this stage, the individual utilizes logical reasoning, abstract thinking and problem solving (full formal operational thinking) and assumes responsibility for their own beliefs and values.

The sixth stage of conjunctive development is not commonly reached by individuals and is rarely seen before the age 30. The individual in this stage no longer relies on others for authority on faith values and beliefs but has fully internalized their own faith. The individual is able to embrace and integrate opposites and polarities in life and has a deeper appreciation for symbols, stories, metaphors and myths from their own faith tradition and that from others.

According to Fowler, the seventh stage of universalizing is rarely attained. The individual sees the world as one universal inclusive community regardless of nationality, social class, age, gender and other divisive characteristics. The individual seeks to transform the world by changing adverse social conditions including violence, division and oppression stemming from a complete identification with the perspective of divine love and justice. Examples of 'universalizing' individuals include Gandhi, Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King Jr. [and Fowler, of course.]

It is with stages six and seven that UU's identify, or at least to which most of us aspire.

[how pluralistic are we, really?]

We claim to believe in religious diversity, but I wonder sometimes if we believe in that only for ourselves. If we are "virtuosi of pluralism," what about the people who are not? Are those at lower stages inferior or just different? Do we have a tendency towards a certain elitism, certain that we have found "the real" truth, which is that everyone else is wrong, less developed? Are we not in danger of becoming as fundamentalist in our own way as those Evangelicals who insist on grounding everything in the words of scripture as they understand it?

We forget that, by objective observation, we are the misfits - not them. Remember that number? 460 Evangelicals to every Unitarian Universalist? We seek respect for our disbelief, but that seems unstable if we are not prepared to offer some measure of respect for the beliefs of the vast majority. One pluralistic Christian speaker I heard at Chautauqua shared his image of a group in heaven gathered at a table for a meal. The group included an atheist who was unhappy about being there!

Now, that's tricky - partly because we are not all in the same place in our "disbelief." There are those in Unitarian Universalist Churches who are more comfortable than others in defining themselves as part of the majority tradition - they have a few questions to raise, but not so many as others among us. They would be "oh, so much happier" if only we would

accept and use just a little more of the traditional language, or talk more about the Bible. And they seem to be on the increase. There are others, of course, who find it hard to tolerate what they view as our excessive use of traditional words, like “church,” and “hymns,” and “sermon.” [Maybe you know some of them.]

Being respectful of the beliefs of others does not require us to passively accept attempts to criminalize homosexuality or to charge with murder those who give or receive abortions, or to refuse to articulate the ways in which we may see beliefs others cherish in a different light. We must not, for the sake of comfort, deny the skepticism, the rational processes that brought us where we are.

In researching for this sermon, I came upon a self-assessment tool developed by Stanley Budner for measuring our comfort with ambiguity.

http://highered.mheducation.com/sites/0073381225/student_view0/chapter14/self-assessment_14_2.html

It asks us to rate our agreement or disagreement with the following 16 statements:

1. An expert who doesn't come up with a definite answer probably doesn't know too much.
2. I would like to live in a foreign country for a while.
3. There is really no such thing as a problem that can't be solved.
4. People who fit their lives into a schedule probably miss most of the joy of living.
5. A good job is one where it is always clear what is to be done and how it is to be done.
6. It is more fun to tackle a complicated problem than to solve a simple one.
7. In the long run, it is possible to get more done by tackling small, simple problems rather than large, complicated ones.
8. Often the most interesting and stimulating people are those who don't mind being different and original.
9. What we are used to is always preferable to what is unfamiliar.
10. People who insist on a yes or no answer just don't know how complicated things really are.
11. A person who leads an even, regular life in which few surprises or unexpected happenings arise really has a lot to be grateful for.
12. Many of our most important decisions are based on insufficient information.
13. I like parties where I know most of the people more than ones where all or most of the people are complete strangers.
14. Teachers or supervisors who hand out vague assignments give one a chance to show initiative and originality.
15. The sooner everyone acquires similar values and ideals, the better.
16. A good teacher is one who makes you wonder about your way of looking at things.

Being raised in a Unitarian Universalist home, my score was 98 out of a possible 112.

[uncertainty wallah]

I sort of like the title of “uncertainty-wallah” - that phrase that Peter Berger used. I would venture to suggest that it is precisely when we are the most certain we are right that we are the most likely to be wrong. We gather in liberal churches as communities which celebrate ambiguity, which proudly declare that there are few things of which we can be certain, and that what we are about is seeking ever greater insight into what is most real - a path from which no

easily held truth will bar us.

This is not an easy path. It takes courage. It takes insight. It takes perseverance. It takes a community of those who walk with us, suggesting when we may be falling into the trap of certainty or arrogance. It is a path with no appeal to many, and great appeal to a few. I try never to forget that there are many very good people who do not feel sustained by the kind of religion we offer.

May we be worthy of the pioneers, of the faithful in the past who paved the liberal way for us - people like those to whom the Apostle Paul referred as "so great a cloud of witnesses" whom he saw as an inspiration to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us." May we be worthy of that proud tradition.