

Retro Theology

(Sermon by Deane M. Perkins)

Leo Buscaglia, the psychologist who learned through his big Italian family about the significance of love as a way to help heal people, tells of a contest he was asked to judge. This story bears repeating, because the contest was to find the most caring child. The winner was a four-year-old child whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman's yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his mother asked him what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, "Nothing. I just helped him cry." (e-mail from A. Shaw, Jan. 20, 2004)

It's all about compassion.

I would like to suggest this morning that for Unitarian Universalism to be a Religion For Our Time in the 21st century,

it must do the unthinkable. It must have a theological foundation, a foundation that goes back to the very roots of all major religions; that is, a foundation of compassion, reverence, peace, and beauty.

Let me provide an historical example, which, for a few, may also be repetitious. I use this example, in part, because of some materials that I sent the Search Committee four years ago, and subsequently learned that one of our couples here who frequently goes to France is equally intrigued by the Cathars.

In the foothills of the Pyrenees, in the southeast of France, there is an area that was once fairly independent politically, known as the Languedoc. It was a fairly significant principality for a number of reasons, not the least of which it was the site of the total massacre of a people known as the Cathars, perhaps the first case of “genocide” in the second

millennium of the Common Era. It was during the time of the Middle Ages, in 1209, when thirty thousand foot soldiers and knights from Northern Europe ravaged the entire area, destroying crops, towns, cities, and the population itself. (see *Holy*

Blood, Holy Grail by Baigent, Lincoln, and Leigh, pg. 21.)

This was known as the Albigensian Crusade, called forth by the Pope of Rome, giving the participants who were wearing the cross on their garments the same rewards, such as the assurance of going to Heaven, as those crusaders who had gone to Palestine to free Jerusalem.

It is very likely that the Cathars in this principality were among some of the most educated people in Europe during the Middle Ages. They prized learning, poetry, courtly love, and promoted religious toleration. This level of culture and learning “would not be seen again until the Renaissance.” (Ibid., pg. 23)

But the Cathars, in Rome's view, were heretics, and had to be destroyed. Although the Cathars did hold to certain principles, they did not have a set doctrine of beliefs or any kind of systematic theology. Generally they saw no validity in clergy hierarchies or the necessity of priestly intercessors between people and God—note that this is a few hundred years before the Protestant Reformation.

That the Cathars believed that there could be a direct relationship with the sacred; that is, a mystical relationship to the divine known as *gnosis*, was particularly heretical. In fact, they seemed to have much in common with the Gnostic sects, who were also condemned by Rome as heretics, that existed 1200 years earlier in Jewish and Christian history.

The Cathar preachers and teachers—both men and women—taught in their congregations about the need to connect

and attain union with the principle of love, not with the principalities and materialism of this world—sounds a lot like Dick Snyder’s sermon last week. And Jesus, who was a prophet not unlike other prophets, was nevertheless viewed as a prophet of the principle of love, manifesting the kind of *gnosis*, mystical knowledge, and union with the divine that pervaded Cathar thinking. Moreover, the Cathars advocated the need to acknowledge the *feminine principle* in religion as well. (Ibid., see pgs. 24-26).

Clearly Rome was not happy with an entire principality in Europe that did not give its full due to Rome herself. And so Pope Innocent III, in 1209, ordered the crusade that did not go to Palestine, but instead trampled across Europe where a highly developed culture would be destroyed, and the people would be exterminated over the next 40 years. One of the most avid and influential fanatics during this crusade was a Spanish man by the

name of Dominic Guzman, who would create, in 1216, the monastic order that would be named after him—the Dominicans. “And in 1233 the Dominicans spawned a more infamous institution—the Holy Inquisition.” (Ibid., pgs. 28-29) And thus we come full circle to Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor.

As Unitarian Universalists, we do not trace our heritage directly to the Cathars. It is interesting, however, that the Cathars were sometimes branded with the name Arian (Ibid., pg. 29) after the bishop Arius during Emperor Constantine’s time. Arianism was an early Christian heresy that we, on our Unitarian side, claim as our theological precursor.

So like the Cathars, we come from a Christian context but do not necessarily believe that Jesus’ divinity is any different than our own. Like the Cathars, we hold the feminine principle of the universe to be just as sacred as the masculine—I cannot

help but wonder, sometimes, if some Buddhist, Hindu and Taoist influence existed among some Christian sects, including the Cathars.

Like the Cathars, our movement has a very strong mystical side. This may seem a bit ironic after talking at our last congregational conversation about the intellectual elitism of Unitarianism. But we cannot forget the Transcendentalists within our movement—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, Theodore Parker and many others. That direct experience with the divine, or gnosis, whether it be through nature, the sacred feminine, meditation, or other spiritual practices, is germane to our movement. And let me suggest that Unitarian Universalism is predominantly N or Intuitive in the Myers-Briggs typology, as is mysticism itself.

So the Cathars provide an intriguing example of a religious movement within a Christian context that has no doctrines or any kind of systematic theology. As such, the Cathars had to be destroyed because their faith transcended the principalities and materialism of Rome. Rome, with all its machinations, was irrelevant. What was meaningful was that “direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder,” which is a direct quote from **our** first source found in **our** hymnals.

I believe that the Cathar faith was a Religion For Its Time. And I believe that Unitarian Universalism can be a Religion For Our Time. But only if it has its own theology—and yes, I think we need to use religious language, because all religious language is symbolic. So like the Cathars, our theology must be non-creedal and non-doctrinal. This is the wonderful irony, another cool paradox! And UUs need to think out of the box in

order to engage in paradox! We need to formulate a theology different from what we are accustomed to—one that is not based on doctrines and beliefs, but on compassion, reverence, peace, and beauty.

What is inspiring to me, is that this kind of worldview does not have to be created *ex nihilo*, just re-created. We can go back to reclaim what is essential for a healthy theology. We can create a theology that appears retro, but in fact is, and has always been, essential for a religion for any time. For a theology centered around compassion, reverence, peace, and beauty meets the spiritual needs of humanity.

Compassion, notes Karen Armstrong in her work on compassion, “lies at the heart of all religious, ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us always to treat all others as we

wish to be treated ourselves.” (Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, pg.

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The ancient virtue of reverence, states Paul Woodruff in his work on reverence, “is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like gods,” for in reverence we “grow the capacity to be in awe.” (Paul Woodruff, *Reverence*, pgs. 3-4)

“Peace,” suggests Thich Nhat Hanh in this poem he recites, “is every step. The shining red sun is my heart. Each flower smiles with me. How green, how fresh all that grows. How cool the wind blows. Peace is every step. It turns the endless path to joy.” (Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace Is Every Step*, pg. ix)

The ancient Greeks—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle—understood Beauty as a principle or virtue. It is not unlike Native Americans who wish friends well by saying, “May you

walk in beauty.” Beauty, ultimately, acknowledges the divine in you, me, mother earth, and father sky.

These elements—compassion, reverence, peace, and beauty—are also essential in all justice work. And so a non-creedal, non-doctrinal theology needs to foster these inner values in order to promote both inner and outer harmony and good works.

So let me name this theology that incorporates these values and principles. Let me name that which existed among early Christian and gnostic groups. Let me name that theology which has been the foundation of every single sermon I have preached, and will continue to be so for my entire ministry here. I name it a Theology of Paradise. Based upon the startling discovery of Parker and Brock which they recount in their work, *Saving Paradise*-- which I talked about a couple of years ago—a

Theology of Paradise preserves a sacred tradition that is this-worldly and that is inherent in our own tradition as Unitarian Universalists. But we don't acknowledge it. We don't name it. We are afraid to take that leap of faith and acknowledge that we Unitarian Universalists are theological people with a theology that is absolutely fundamental to the health and well-being of our souls and of our earth-home. A theology is a worldview—a Weltanschauung says German theologians—a worldview that says that the greatest gift in the world is to be a child, sit in a person's lap—sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically—and “just help the person cry.”

A Theology of Paradise is this-worldly, it “is every step,” it is life-affirming, and it is the root and identity of our very faith. Maybe it is time we offer an Adult Lifespan course on Parker and Brock's work, *Saving Paradise*. But I think it is time we

UUs truly become A Religion For Our Time. We need a theology, a paradisiacal theology (and yes, that's a real word).

And we need one thing more—one additional piece to becoming a Religion For Our Time that I will talk about in January. I know, it's such a cliffhanger! Meanwhile, consider practicing compassion, reverence, peace, and beauty-- on your own lap.

Blessed Be. Amen.

