



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK

Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square

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Each year the Unitarian Universalist Association chooses one book as a “Common Read,” and encourages all UUs to read, discuss, and consider action in light of the contents.

Previous Common Reads have included:

- The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands
- Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation
- The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, and
- Behind the Kitchen Door (about justice for restaurant workers)

Here at UUCF, we have read, studied, and in various ways engaged in activism around the justice issues these books raise. And if any of those titles pique your interest, I would highly recommend any or all of them.

This year’s UUA Common Read is Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square by a UU minister named Paul Rasor, who is currently the director of the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom at Virginia Wesleyan College.

I should perhaps add that if you are intrigued by Rasor’s title, the good news is that his book is quite short, weighing in at around 100 pages. A major goal of the book is to challenge UUs as well as other religious progressives to reflect on the ways our values do (or could) support our activism to help create a more just, equitable, and peaceful world.

When I think about his title “Reclaiming Prophetic Witness,” what first comes to mind for me is the biblical tradition of the Hebrew prophets. But the theologically conservative Christian congregation of my childhood taught me to view the Hebrew prophets in a very different way than Rasor has in mind. They taught me to read the “Old Testament” selectively for the ways these books could be seen as predicting events centuries into the future in the life of Jesus. But in college when I took a class on the Hebrew prophets and began reading those books from the perspective of their original context, it is clear that most of the biblical prophets were concerned not with the distant future, but with social injustice and corruption *in their own day* — and that they would be perplexed and shocked if they could somehow have known how Christians would come to read their texts centuries later. As the Jewish literary critic Harold Bloom has said regarding the Christian use of Jewish scripture, **“Christianity stole our watch and has spent 2,000 years telling us what time it is.”**

There is a lot more to say about the interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and I will eventually teach a class here at UUCF on the Hebrew prophets, but for now let me give you just two pivotal examples that were highly influential on twentieth-century social prophets such as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Hershel and The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. First, from the fifth chapter of the prophet Amos, speaking on behalf of the divine, Amos says to the people:

“21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. 22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. 23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. 24 But **let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.**”

A second example is from the sixth chapter of the prophet Micah and has been called the “sum of the prophets”:

“6 ...Shall I come before [God] with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will [God] be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” “[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what [is required] of

you but to **do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly** with your God?”

The biblical prophets felt that God wanted the world to be *less* corrupt and *more* just, peaceful, and equitable — and they lived out this sacred calling often in very startling, disturbing, and intimidating ways.

But we don't live in Israel during the eighth-century B.C.E., but instead in the West in the early twenty-first century — on the other side of the Scientific Revolution: after the discoveries of Copernicus, Darwin, Einstein, Hubble and many others. So what might it mean to “reclaim prophetic witness” today? What are our sacred values that can inspire us to work for a more peaceful and just world — to pick up and extend the work of the prophets who have come before us and on whose shoulders we stand?

The late American Pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty wrote about what it might look like to see ourselves as part of a long line of prophetic witness. Limiting our focus for now to only the past few centuries here in the U.S., Rorty writes about the possibility of increasing numbers of people

acquiring an image of [ourselves] as heirs to a tradition of increasing liberty and rising hope.... wanting [ourselves and our] children to come to think of [ourselves] as proud and loyal citizens of a country that, slowly and painfully, threw off a foreign yoke, freed its slaves, enfranchised its women, restrained its robber barons and licensed its trade unions, liberalized its religious practices, broadened its...moral tolerance, and built colleges in which [increasing percentages] of its population could enroll. A country that numbered Jefferson, Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Eugene Debs...Rosa Parks, and James Baldwin among its citizens.

Along these lines, Rasor is inviting us to take a step back and reflect on the core, sacred values that motivated our forebears to work for social change in the hope that explicitly naming those sacred values might ennoble, enliven, and embolden us to, in Dr. King's words, build the Beloved Community.

For Razor, such sacred values are “*liberal* religious values.” And before I proceed, allow me to address the confusion that can arise from Razor’s subtitle “Liberal Religion in the Public Square.” He does not mean that being a UU necessitates being a Democrat any more than being a Christian necessitates being a Republican. Instead, it is very much possible — and has many times been the case historically — that one can be a Religious Liberal and a Political Conservative or vice-versa.

Just as we seek to be a liberal religious traditions in the best sense of the word *liberal* (from the Latin root for “free”) — open to new ideas, generous, openhanded, open-hearted, and open-minded — there has also been room historically and there is room today within our the “Big Tent” of Unitarian Universalism for those who are *conservative* in the best sense of the word: caring about conservation of nature, upholding the beauty of traditions and rituals that accrued deep meaning through the test of time, reminding us of the importance not only of individual rights and equality (which liberals tend to value most highly), but also of community, authority, sanctity, and loyalty. This dynamic is one reason that many religious progressives resonate deeply with contemporary prophets such as Wendell Berry, who are conservative in the best sense of the word. We desperately need such voices within progressive religious communities.

But in contrast to this “Big Tent” position, conventional wisdom today too often wrongly holds that all religious people are political, social, and economic conservatives — overemphasizing the Religious Right and ignoring the historic influence of the Religious Left from Women’s Suffrage to Civil Rights, and more. And surveying our landscape today, Razor highlights:

two ‘theologies’ that dominate the U.S. American cultural experience: the theology of redemptive violence [which insists that “bad violence must be overcome by good violence”] and the theology of free-market fundamentalism.... [which insists that “the free market creates order and balance”]

And one major challenge of Razor’s book is to consider what alternative convictions religious progressives might bring to the public square.

As a starting point, Rasor offers the following list of “**Core Theological Principles of Religious Liberals**” for consideration by the wider UU movement:

- The fundamental unity and interdependence of all existence
- The transforming power of love
- The inherent worth and dignity of all persons
- Human freedom
- Rejection of moral dualism (rejecting the sharp separation of good and evil, refusing to assign individuals and nations to one category or the other)
- Social justice — enable all to live with dignity and respect
- Cooperative power — persuasion over coercion
- Religious freedom
- Theological openness (100-102)

To give just a few examples of what the practical implications could be, in a review of recent resolutions passed by the UUA at recent General Assemblies, Rasor notes that, “Most read like political policy platforms rather than statements of religious conviction; fewer than 20 percent mentioned Unitarian Universalist’s core Principles, and then only in passing among the introductory ‘whereas’ clauses” (27).

But what if we introduced our religious convictions — our core, sacred values — into the equation? To give just three examples,

- How might our environmental justice work to curb Climate Change be more sustainable if it emerged out of a deep, felt experience of our Seventh Principle, “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”
- Likewise, how might our work to defend against threats to Voting Rights be stronger if it emerged out of our Fifth Principle, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large?”
- And how might our work *for* immigration justice or *against* torture be inspired through the awareness that our First Principle (“The inherent worth and dignity of every person”) is drawn from the first line of the preamble to the 1948 United Nations’ “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” which recognizes that, “the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable

rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world...”? Likewise, the very first sentence of Article I says, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” For me, it is incredibly **powerful, significant, and hopeful to be part of a religious movement that has explicitly chosen to weave into our First Principle the starting point of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.**

Those are the sorts of sentiments that Razor is trying to tap into when he talks about “Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square.”

And with all this being said, allow me to be clear as well that by no means am I trying to undermine the First Amendment protection against the “establishment of religion.” At the same time, the First Amendment also prohibits interference with the “free exercise” of religion. And regarding the intersection of religion and state, perhaps Dr. King said it best in his book The Strength to Love:

The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the **conscience of the state**. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.

For now, I will leave you with these words from the forward to Razor’s book that remind us of the many different forms of prophetic witness needed in our world today:

In times like these, prophets must speak loudly, clearly, and with many voices.

- We need **prophets of economics** to explain the cascading consequences of inequality and envision workplace democracy and socially responsible investment.
- We need **prophets of science** who can track the steady increase in global temperatures, chart its implications, and convey the urgency of those implications to policymakers.
- We need **prophets of the arts** to express their vision for social renewal in stirring songs and inspiring stories.

- We need **prophets who testify to the human costs of inequality and oppression**, and tell their stories of how individuals and communities are fighting back.
- And...we need **prophets of faith** to bring the rich resources of religion into the struggle, making ancient traditions new by applying them to today's challenges.

The question then turns to each of us to look inside ourselves — and around at our occupations and connections — and ask: **How do I feel called to speak or act prophetically in my particular spheres of influence?**

<p>Freedom from (Enlightenment/Modernity, Radical Protestant Reformation, Progress)</p>	<p>Freedom for (Postmodernity, Beloved Community)</p>
<p>freedom of religious thought (protest)</p>	<p>participative inquiry</p>
<p>unrestricted use of reason (rationalism)</p>	<p>relational spiritual practice</p>
<p>tolerance of different views practices (individualism)</p>	<p>pluralism (interdependence)</p>
	<p>social action generosity</p>