What can Theology do for Uus

Sheridan Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Sheridan Wyoming

Phil Gilmore; 9/28/14

Last Week Janelle gave the presentation “Smooth Stones and Jagged Rocks: UU Theology”. Continuing with this months’ theme of” UU Theology? “, this presentation is “What can Theology do for UUs”.

I would like to build on Janelle’s talk so for those of you who missed last week, (and for those of us with short memories) a brief synopsis of some of the high points.

* Janelle defined “Theology” as that which deals with the nature of God, whether there is or isn’t a God, what happens when we die, how we should live, what is the source of morality, what is the source of evil, where do we come from, why are we here, what is true and etc.
* The 7 UU principles are more a statement of acceptable behavior, than a statement of theology. They deal with more a description of how we should act rather than addressing any of the above theological questions (at least directly). When talking theology to folks from other churches, our principles fall short of describing what we believe on theological issues.
* The Unitarian Theologian James Luther Adams defined the five smooth stones of liberal theology, and Nancy Bowen has proposed five theological points she calls five jagged rocks. Both are statements of what they feel are UU theology.
* In summary Janelle presented her “UU Theology according to Janelle”, based on the major differences between UU and other churches. They are:
1. We believe in salvation in this life.
2. We believe that truth continues to be revealed.
3. We believe that relations between people should be free of coercion.
4. We believe in the inherent sacredness of all souls.
5. We believe in a unity that binds all things.
6. We believe that we have the power to transform the world.

The title of this presentation is “What can theology do for UU’s”. For one thing, it would make everyone more comfortable about that awkward moment in the elevator trying to explain what we believe. It would make other churches breathe a little easier if they could classify us. And at least for some, it would provide a foundation to help them guide their lives. I think stating what we believe, rather than pointing out what we don’t would be a step in the right direction. Supposedly that is what a UU theology would provide. Would it help us to increase our attendance?

After Janelle’s presentation, Jules commented that theology helps to answer the question what are you looking for? For Christians the question is sin, and the answer is salvation. For Buddists the question suffering and the answer meditation. So what is the question that we want our theology to answer, and what could be the answer?

This is where I see the problem for uu’s. Our spiritual journey is so individual that the questions and the answers must also be individual. Is it possible to craft a true theology broad enough to cover us all, and still specific enough to not be meaningless?

Bruce suggested that the very flexibility of uu is the answer to this dilemma. The search for answers is the true goal. Once you have the answer, there had better be another question! We draw from all religions, and accept whatever truth we find from whatever source. We are skeptical of everything, and turn each nuance inside out to discover what we accept and what we reject.

Tom Schade blogged in June of 2013 about Marilyn Sewell’s June of 2011 take on UU Theology. He has expressed many of my own thoughts better than I could formulate them. Here are his comments:

*Back in 2011, Rev Marilyn Sewell, published a post on Huff Post entitled “The Theology of Unitarian Universalist”. In summary, we Unitarian Universalists do have a theology:*

* *We believe that human beings should be free to choose their beliefs according to the dictates of their own conscience.*
* *We believe in original goodness, with the understanding that sin is sometimes chosen, often because of pain or ignorance.*
* *We believe that God is One.*
* *We believe that revelation is ever unfolding.*
* *We believe that the Kingdom of God is to be created here on this earth.*
* *We believe that Jesus was a prophet of God, and that other prophets from God have risen in other faith traditions.*
* *We believe that love is more important than doctrine.*
* *We believe that God’s mercy will reconcile all unto itself in the end.*

*Peter Bowden recently asked for “a reality check” on this formulation over the UUGrowth Lab Group on Facebook, and the comments are pouring in.*

*My Take: (Tom Schade)*

*First of all: her statement is not a summary of what most UU’s believe, expressed in the terms with which most UU’s think.*

*I would say it is a liberal reinterpretation of Christian doctrine through the lens of human agency and greater free will. If one starts from a belief that human beings everywhere have the power to make effective choices which will either improve the human condition or not, and then applies that understanding to Christian doctrine – what you get is pretty close to what Rev Sewell proposes.*

*UU’s do this a lot. One of the most common covenants of our churches is a similar reinterpretation of traditional Christian theological categories. It’s like an equivalency chart.*

*Love is the Doctrine of this Church, the quest for truth its sacrament, and service is its prayer, etc.*

*You ask about our “doctrine” we say “love”. You ask about our “sacraments” we say quest for truth”. How do UU’s “pray?” we do “service”. Etc*

*I think that it is necessary, especially for our ministers, to be able to explain what we believe in terms that the wider Christian community can understand. It’s an absolute necessity for our seminarians if they intend to graduate from a Christian seminary. And there are lots of communities in the USA where a UU religious professional simply has to explain what we think to regular people who think in those traditional terms.*

*But the results are not a UU theology that sums up UU religious and spiritual thought. Its an exercise in working backwards from current UU positions about the human condition to answer the historic questions in Christian theology in ways that will support our conclusions. It’s like when august bodies of Church leaders think hard and come out with statements that say that hot sex is a gift from God. It’s pretty clearly stating what they already thought in the language of the Church.*

*We believe that people can make effective moral choices. We really do. So, we will have to reinterpret the doctrine of original sin into something else. Same with the fallen nature of humanity, and the necessity of salvation from without, the existence of heaven and hell and the divinity of Jesus as being necessary for our salvation. None of those doctrines can serve as premises for a full belief in human agency.*

*To be blunt, we like the Ballou’s because we are already universalists. We like Channing because we were already doubtful about the divinity of God.*

*Unitarian Universalists who are not interested in Christian theology will find little of value in Rev Sewell’s comments. And they will say that UU’s don’t need or want a theology, if you define that word as a structured and internally consistent system of understanding of Christian thought.*

*Notice that Rev. Sewell’s piece tries to answer the misconception “you can believe anything you want and be a Unitarian Universalist.” I think sometimes it would be more accurate to say “you can’t believe anything and say it out loud as a Unitarian Universalist without offending some other UU, who will let you know.”*

*It looks like Rev Sewell just found that out.*

Without having read Sewell’s post, it is perhaps unfair to share this criticism of her work. I find this blog overly critical. I found many things in Sewell’s post inspiring me with the ring of truth, and suggest you all take the time to look at it for its’ own sake. But when she stated our beliefs, I do agree with several of his points, especially about the Christian perspective of her post. I found myself reinterpreting her statements of UU theology to fit my perspective, rather than agreeing that these are what all uu’s believe.

I find myself agreeing with MB Tankersley who responded to the above conversation thusly: As a long time UU, the best way I have to answer when somebody asks me if we have a theology is “yes –how many do you need?” In fact I believe we each have our own individual take on what UU theology is. There are shades of meaning even if we happen to agree verbatim with a particular statement of ”UU theology”. Our understanding is continually evolving.

Two weeks ago Janelle, Kris, Bill, Skye and I took a hike from the parking lot at steam boat down turkey creek canyon, across the tongue just below the box canyon and down tongue canyon to the parking lot at the end of the road. As anyone who has ever taken this journey can tell you, there are many routes down the mountain, but each path only lasts a short distance, and there are thickets, thorns, blisters, rattle snakes and drop offs no matter which way you go. There are also vistas, sunlight, breezes, fossils, and if you are hiking with someone, companionship. And at the bottom everyone must cross the rushing water of the stream to get to the easy path home. I choose UU because everyone is encouraged to try their own path, or share one with others. Everyone gets to enjoy or hate the trip, and everyone can help refine the best route. Bowen, Adams, Sewell and Janelle all have offered their take on what UU theology is all about. It is comforting to be able to borrow, reject, amend, share, discuss, plagiarize, and adopt my own theology. As Sewell states, “In a very real sense, all theology is autobiography, is it not?” As a familiar tradition, here then are my (current, up to date) theological beliefs.

Phil’s theological beliefs.

1. I believe in living today. (We experience heaven and hell in this life. Even if there is an afterlife, don’t count on it.) Salvation is in this life.
2. I believe in evolution. (Truth continues to be revealed. Truth comes from many sources, and no one has a monopoly.) Admitting this frees us to be open to ideas, Agnosticism is not a dirty word.
3. I believe in the golden rule I learned in Methodist Sunday school. (Don’t try to force others, play nice, no hitting. Usually, treating others like you want to be treated works well.)
4. I believe there is good in everyone, even when I can’t see it. (Sacredness of all souls.) Original goodness.
5. I believe that “God” is the totality of the connections in the universe. Be grateful. (Unity of all things) The Christian debate of “is God one or is God a trinity”, totally misses the point for me, but I guess that just means I am not a Christian. Other churches have one path, one stained glass window with everyone crowding around to get as close as possible to the light, we have copies of all the others windows and we choose which window we want to look at each day. The light through the stained glass window example sheds light on how I view differing religious viewpoints, but does not come close to describing anything more about God to me.
6. I believe in trying to make the world better. (People have a choice, and can make informed decisions. People have the power to change the world. Be optimistic.) Courageous love will transform the world.
7. I believe it is each individual’s right, and duty to explore and refine their own theological beliefs.

I invite each of you to try an experiment. Write down your own theological beliefs. Don’t be bashful about borrowing from whatever source you choose. Amend what others have said to fit your own personal beliefs. Share your insights with whoever you are comfortable with. This UU space is the safest place I know to share. I doubt any two lists will be the same, but perhaps I am wrong here. Perhaps everyone will agree with my theological beliefs to the letter, and we can adopt them as the “True” UU theology. If so, then I will start my new updated list sooner rather than later.

So what can UU theology do for Uu’s. Everything and nothing. In my view the the 7 principles are a miracle of sorts. Our very disparity and openness to opposing views precludes any agreement on religious theology unless we adopt a radically skewed definition of what theology is. On the other hand being able to bring our individual beliefs to the table for review, discussion, and revision means everything to anyone who is searching. To be trite. We have questions. And when someone asks what Uu’s believe in the elevator tell them either:

1. You doubt there is any belief shared by all Uu’s, but that you believe ---
2. You will have to come to our church to figure this out.

Thank you