

The Curriculum of the Free Church

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I have often meditated on the words of Antoine De St. Exupery: "In a house that becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds. We live not by things but by the meanings of things. It is needful therefore, to transmit the passwords from generation to generation."

As members of the Free Church tradition, we ought to be asking ourselves, what exactly is our particular heritage of the mind and heart? Simply put, what are the essential characteristics of the Free Church? For it is these essential characteristics which form the passwords, we must transmit to the next generation.

The inspiration for this paper is an actual young man. His name is Adam. He is a fellow very much like the original Adam, a man without a past, a man without a history. The Adam in my story is in his 20's, a member of the so called X Generation. I met him when I served as minister of one of our churches in New Orleans

Adam is a birthright Unitarian. Meaning that he is not a come outer from another tradition, but rather a product of our own movement. Adam grew up in one of our Fellowships, and attended one of our Religious Education programs. His parents are active Unitarian Universalists at the local and national level.

When we first met, Adam had recently been graduated from college, and had come to New Orleans to seek his fortune. Adam's parents had encouraged him to visit the local Unitarian church as a way of meeting other young people and developing friendships. He did come to church; he introduced himself to me, told me about his background. He began to attend Sunday services on a sporadic basis.

One Sunday morning, following the worship service, Adam lingered behind while the sanctuary emptied. As I greeted the last worshiper and turned to go to the coffee hour in another part of the building, I saw Adam standing before me in the center aisle of the church blocking my path to the fellowship hall. There was obviously something on his mind.

"Unitarian Universalism isn't much of a religion," he blurted out as he stood in the middle of the aisle, feet planted, arms crossed, chin out. It wasn't a question. It was clearly a statement, or perhaps an accusation.

"Why do you say that?" I replied.

"It's all just made up, or borrowed. We don't have any real beliefs. We don't have any rules. We don't have any spirituality of our own. We just take from other people. There's really nothing here."

"Adam," I responded, "how can you say there's nothing here? What about our

history? What about where we've come from and how we've developed? We have our own spirituality. Our own way of being faithful... Our own heroes... There's plenty here. Didn't they teach you any of that when you were in Sunday school?"

"What's the difference?" he shrugged, turned, and left me standing there in an empty sanctuary at a loss for words.

How many times have I chided myself for not making a more pastoral response to Adam's challenge? But what if we were to take what Adam said at face value: "What is the difference?" What is different about our way of organizing ourselves into religious communities than the ways in which, for example, Roman Catholics or Presbyterians have organized themselves? And what difference do those differences make?

Did Adam's Unitarian Sunday School fail him by neglecting to instill in him an understanding of who we are and what ideas define us? I do not know for certain, but I suspect that Adam's Sunday school teachers emphasized our diversity when teaching him about the our movement. He may have learned about World Religions, and about nature and even about evolution, but what his Sunday school teachers may have failed to teach him is an appreciation for those common bonds which give us our identity as a religious movement.

What do we need to be teaching the Adams, and Emmas, and Tylers and Sarahs that are now coming up through our Sunday schools? And what do we need to be communicating to the adults who join our congregations from other religious traditions or no tradition at all?

The Meaning of Covenant

In keeping with our heritage, we rightly reject the notion of A Catechism of the Free Church. Nevertheless, I feel that we might comfortably speak of The Curriculum of the Free Church, or what I like to call, The Three C's: Covenant, Congregational Polity and Conscience.

The Curriculum of the Free Church begins with an understanding of the meaning and importance of covenant. It is relatively easy to describe our way of being faithful as non-creedal or non-doctrinal, and to place emphasis on the diversity of beliefs that exists among members of our congregations. For newcomers to the Free Church, this is often interpreted as "believe whatever you wish to believe." This "do it yourself religion" may at first provide a heady sense of freedom, especially for those individuals coming out of more orthodox traditions, but later on this freedom may come to seem like a formless, shapeless, bottomless void. Recall my friend Adam's cry, "There's nothing here!" Building your own theology requires some tools or at least a set of commonly held assumptions about human nature, the meaning of freedom, and the source of ultimate values. An understanding of shared covenant is one of those tools.

How many times have you responded to the question, "With all of your diversity of beliefs, what, if anything makes your congregation a church?" A covenant is what makes the difference between a group of people who share a common interest in religious topics or study and a congregation of free men and women who gather under the banner of the Free Church tradition.

As Conrad Wright describes it in *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in*

Unitarian Universalist Churches, "Every denomination must have some way of understanding itself, some notion of what gives it its special identity. For Presbyterians it has been the Westminster Confession; for Episcopalians the Book of Common Prayer. For churches like ours, it is the covenant---not the words of any particular covenant, but the covenant relationship of mutual obligation."

This idea of covenant not only describes the nature of all our relationships within the Free Church, but also the nature of what it means to be human. To be a fully functioning free human being, or to use more theological language, to be a human being conscious of the fact that he or she is created in the image and likeness of his/her Creator, is to acknowledge oneself to be a man or a woman capable of making and keeping promises. Covenants are a special kind of promise making and promise keeping activity, through which two or more parties project themselves into an unknown future by pledging mutual fidelity, come what may.

In past generations, most "come outers" to our tradition came out from more orthodox churches. We could easily make the distinction for them between the creedal church and the non-creedal church. They knew what a creed was. Additionally most previously "churched" come outers had some familiarity with the idea of covenant as expressed through Biblical stories, such as the stories of Abraham, Noah and Moses. Increasingly though, our churches are attracting a generation of "come iners." Those who are coming to us "unchurched" with no formal religious background at all. Coming in from the secular world, they may be familiar only with relationships based on contractual agreements. The challenge for religious educators, therefore, is to teach newcomers both the historical and the theological roots of covenant.

Beginning with the ancient history of covenant as descriptive of the relationship between the Children of Israel and their God, and moving through history to the 17th century covenants of the New England Puritans by which members agreed to walk together in mutual fellowship, to the modern day covenants shared by Unitarian Congregations, we move toward an essential understanding of what it means to be a human being.

Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams wrote: "Human beings, individually and collectively, become human by making commitment, by making promises. The human being as such is the promise making, promise keeping, promise renewing creature. The human being is the promise maker, the commitment maker."

This is the center or the core of Free Religion. Alice Blair Wesley in her book *Myths of Time and History* writes: The center of the Free Church, the heart of the whole thing, is a promise of fidelity, a covenant, which each member freely makes upon joining. Too often our promise, or covenant is implicit, not consciously explicit. But it doesn't really matter whether it is verbalized. It matters whether it is faithfully meant. Our covenant is simply our promise that we shall together seek truth and support one another as we dare, whatever the cost, to live by the truths we cannot help believing we have found at any particular time, and to support one another in doubt, in those times we can't find or can't decide what the relevant truth is. The free church is held together, insofar as we live by the spirit of that promise."

An undergirding principle of the covenantal community of faith is that our

independent wills exist in service of an interdependent web. God is understood as that community forming power/community sustaining power. We are united not by our theological beliefs, but by the promises we make to each other. We are bound not by rules or by laws or by transient political agendas, but by a commitment to right relationship. We pledge to treat each other with honor, dignity and compassion even when we disagree with each other, most especially when we disagree with each other. In the words of one of our forebears: "We need not think alike to love alike." Thus we may speak of our whole lives as free human beings as intricate networks of interlocking covenants: those promises we freely make to each other as spouses, as members of a family, as members of a free church, as well as those promises made between individual ministers and congregations, and those covenants made between sister congregations.

Out of this human capacity to pledge ourselves to live together in right relationship come-what-may grows the soul of the Free Church. We are communities of faith bound not by commonly held beliefs, but by commonly kept promises. The difference between creed and covenant is the difference between making the statement "we believe" and making the statement "I promise." What a difference that difference makes.

Unlike our more familiar kind of promise, the contract, which is automatically broken if one party fails to honor his end of the deal, a covenant remains in place even if one party is unable to honor it. Relationships based on covenants allow for failure, forgiveness, reconciliation, and grace.

Relationships based on covenant are quite ancient, much older than the first creeds, dating back to the covenant between God and Abraham. The spirit of covenant is beautifully expressed in words attributed to the Apostle Paul: "For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use that freedom as an opportunity for self indulgence. but through love serve one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:13-15, An Inclusive Version)

The Meaning of Congregational Polity

The second lesson in the Curriculum of the Free Church might well be entitled: The Relationship Between Congregational Polity And Liberal Theology. At my church, we call our four part series of Inquirers Classes, "Roots." When I announce to a Roots class that at the next session we are going to talk about Congregational Polity or How the Church Works Together, I am often greeted with groans. My students suspect that polity has something to do with politics and to most of them, politics are considered a "not so nice" field of human endeavor.

"Enough about how the church works, the policy, the polity or the politics," members of my Roots class respond. "When are we going to talk about religious beliefs and things like that?"

And I respond with, "Tell me how a group of people choose to organize themselves into a body; and tell me how they determine who their members are and who their leaders are; and tell me how they make decisions that effect the whole body

and I can tell you what they believe. Polity shapes theology, as much if not more than theology shapes polity.”

In the introduction to his book, *Congregational Polity*, Unitarian historian Conrad Wright states: "Our polity is important because it defines the way in which we believe human beings should be related to one another for ecclesiastical purposes, and may be a guide or model for human relationships of other kinds. There are real differences between democratic, hierarchical, oligarchical and authoritarian patterns of social organization. Behind these social forms lie understandings of the nature of human beings. When conceptualized and phrased in theological language, this means that both a doctrine of human nature and a doctrine of the Church. So polity is not a matter of casual social arrangements, but goes very directly to the heart of basic issues of theology.”

Congregational polity includes the authority of each individual congregation, through democratic means, to determine its own membership, to elect its own leaders, to call or dismiss its own minister, to determine its own style of worship, to support or refuse to support a common political agenda, to own property, to enter into lateral relationships with other congregations, to form associations, and to raise money for a common cause. Conrad Wright also reminds us that Congregational Polity not only describes the autonomy of each church or fellowship, but also describes those important lateral relationships between congregations for their mutual support, strengthening and encouragement.

This kind of power vested in the individual congregation, rather than a denominational structure, leads directly to the notion that the congregation's members must be able to discern the good and act upon it without the advice or intervention of an outside authority, such as a Bishop or Board of Elders. Which implies, to use theological terms, a common belief in humanity's original goodness rather than its original sin. The desire for self-governance is always assertion that one has the capacity for moral discernment.

We can better examine the radical theology behind congregational polity by examining the history and the process by which we obtain our ministers. In the Free Church the minister is "called" rather than hired or appointed. He or she is first and foremost a member of the congregation like all other members, differing only in role. That is not to say that the minister lacks authority, for indeed he or she has authority by virtue of the call and an election by the congregation. That authority is entrusted to the minister by the congregation through the congregation's shared covenant. Implicit in the "call" and in the minister's authority is mutual trust and respect. The congregation says in effect, "In the spirit of trust, we empower one of our own, to lead us in the ways of righteousness and truth; to preach the truth in love without fear or favor for an unspecified period of time.” So sacred is this relationship between minister and congregation that no third party, such as a denominational official, or another minister has the right to insert himself or herself between a minister and congregation without the explicit permission of both parties.

The covenant between minister and congregation has often been compared to the marriage covenant in that both parties pledge to love, honor and cherish each other

for better or worse, not just when they are of the same mind on a subject. Unlike contracts, which presuppose mutual suspicion and doubt, covenants presuppose the capacity for mutual trust. Implicit in this capacity for trust and mutuality between minister and congregation is a commonly held belief in the worth and dignity of the individual.

When 17th century Puritans in New England elected their own ministers it was out of necessity. They were forming congregations on the frontier far away from the assistance of an already established ecclesiastical hierarchy. Although it was necessity that prompted the election of clergy from among their own members, they were making a change that would in time grow to have far reaching theological implications. The act of choosing a minister from among their own ranks presumed a certain theological perspective on human nature, not explicitly developed until nearly two centuries later: to discern who among them was fit to be (to use their words) Christ's representative on earth meant that each individual must possess some capacity to know what is good, moral and true. The prevailing Calvinistic doctrines of original sin and total depravity were gradually being challenged by a more hopeful view of human nature. Their polity, the ways in which they organized themselves and selected their leaders, came to shape and eventually change their theology.

Polity makes a difference in our theology---perhaps not immediately, but eventually. When we choose to weaken or even depart from our roots in Congregational Polity, we ought to be aware that in the long term, for good or ill, our theology will be affected.

Freedom of Conscience in Our Democratic Tradition

The third "C" in the Curriculum of the Free Church stands for Freedom of Conscience. In a recent radio interview, a Tulsa Congregationalist minister made the telling statement: "The opposite of liberal is not conservative---it is authoritarian." Meaning that without a commitment to freedom of conscience, a liberal theological position or social agenda can be put forth in a distinctly not liberal manner. Liberal religion is not the same as left wing ideology, but rather it is a methodology for discerning truth that is distinctively antiauthoritarian.

Unitarians are for the most part accepting of theological and sociological diversity within their congregations. In his book *Walking Together*, Conrad Wright states: "A liberal church will not use creedal formulations to exclude persons whose theological views are not quite in line with the doctrinal position prevailing among its members. Nor will it introduce qualifications based on race, ethnic background, or national origin. A church may well have a particular doctrinal coloring: one may be predominantly theist, another humanistic; one may be explicitly Christian, another not. But it is for the individual to decide whether he or she belongs within that community, not for the community to decide whether the individual conforms to its doctrinal preferences. No church can be all things to all people, and a policy of open membership does not require that it should. But the boundary lines are drawn by individual choices, not by official judgment."

As I understand it, freedom of conscience is necessary because it is the mission of the Free Church to help each and every person become a fully functioning free

individual. It is also the mission of Free Church to maintain the kind of environment in which freedom flourishes. We have concluded over the years that God, the Holy, the Ground of Being, That Which Is Sacred and Sovereign is made manifest in freedom. Creeds, doctrines, dogmas, second hand opinions don't bring people closer to God. These human made devices more often than not have only come between individuals and an authentic experience of the Holy. Each man and woman stands before his or her God, without the mediation of a priest, institution, or holy book. Any individual or institution that would come between an individual and his God is by its very nature coercive.

But it is an error to say that freedom of conscience means that we members of the Free Church may believe whatever it is that we wish to believe. In truth, we all believe only that which we must believe. I am required to believe only those things which my reason, my experience, and my moral intuition compel me to believe. I am not required to take something on faith alone. To paraphrase John Shelby Spong, "I believe only what I must because my heart will not embrace what my mind cannot accept as true." That is freedom of conscience.

But if we are each free to believe only what we must, why create and maintain religious institutions? We often hear the comment, "Why do free spirited Unitarians even need a church? Why not simply engage in private communion alone in a leafy glade?" Why form religious communities? The answer is simple. Without community, freedom is meaningless; without each other, we are just alone, not free. We gather together in community to preserve and strengthen the capacity of each individual to freely discern what conscience dictates, as well as to protect and advance freedom in all spheres of life.

Two distinct ways in which freedom of conscience is made manifest in our congregations are freedom of the pew and freedom of the pulpit. We understand freedom of the pew to mean that no one may be excluded from our fellowship by virtue of his or her stated religious beliefs.

In Unitarian churches we frequently revel that our theological diversity includes self-professed Christians, atheists, pagans, Buddhist, agnostics and Wiccans to name a few. But recalling the words of my UCC colleague in Tulsa: "The opposite of liberal is not conservative; it is authoritarian." Social justice issues may become de facto creedal tests, by which church members, whose conscience leads them to embrace a position different from the majority, find themselves subtly "excommunicated " from their church.

I recall a movement among some members of a church I once served, parenthetically, a congregation which often celebrated its commitment to diversity, to formally exclude from Sunday worship individuals who identified themselves with the Pro-Life agenda. I was informed that the mere presence of individuals wearing Pro-Life lapel pins was both offensive and disruptive to other worshipers, exclusive of any other disruptive or anti-social behavior. Individuals wearing pins that identified them as being supportive of the anti-death penalty cause, were not seen as either offensive or disruptive. Causes themselves were not disruptive, only certain causes. It was clear that there were members of the congregation who felt that a particular party line took precedence over freedom of conscience. If the majority were Pro-choice, then those

who were not, ought to be either excluded from fellowship or driven into silence. Only certain types of diversity were to be celebrated. This kind of thinking, although not uncommon in our congregations, is an affront to Freedom of Conscience.

Freedom of the pew requires that we remain in fellowship with individuals with whom we agree to disagree, whether the matter at hand be spiritual or political -- as long as those individuals refrain from coercive behavior. Freedom of the pew also means that any member may disagree with a theological or social justice position taken by the minister, without fear of retribution. The minister speaks for him or herself alone. The people in the pews are only required to believe what their conscience dictates.

Freedom of the pulpit has been interpreted in recent years to mean that any member of the congregation, or for that matter any individual, has a right to enter the pulpit on any given Sunday and speak his or her mind.

This "open pulpit" notion has resulted in worship services that have included strippers, streakers and all manner of surprising revelations and disclosures. In some of our churches, the minister is only permitted to preach two or three Sundays a month in order to give the congregation "their turn" on the other Sundays. Their turn often means virtually anything goes.

Ironically, the original intent of the free pulpit was not to give free access to the pulpit to just anyone, but rather to guarantee that the called minister would have the ability to preach the truth in love without fear or favor. While access to the pulpit was the right of the congregation, the minister was entrusted with the responsibility of seeing that the privilege of the pulpit was not abused, not just when he or she was preaching, but on every other Sunday as well. The pulpit was regarded as such a potentially powerful force, that the minister was placed in a position to guard it from abuse. Freedom of the pulpit was never intended to be a license granted to anyone in or outside the congregation to vent their spleen, or to shock, or to merely entertain or amuse.

Freedom of the pulpit enabled the called minister to speak prophetically without fear of being dismissed. Freedom of the pulpit also meant that the preacher spoke only for him or herself. It was never expected that he or she would have to preach so broadly as to embrace every conceivable theological or social opinion that might be held by those in the pews. Freedom of the pulpit enabled members of a congregation to know exactly where their minister stood on social and theological issues, whether they agreed with him or not.

In the early centuries of this country, ministers speaking from the Free Pulpit were the conscience of the nation. Sermons directed at the social ills of the day were published in secular newspapers and widely read and acted upon. The pulpit was held in such high esteem precisely because it was not a Hyde Park Soap Box from which just any one had the right to express an opinion. In our present day, when our political leaders consult opinion polls and focus groups before they take a stand, modern day members of the Free Church ought to be delighted to hear a leader speak openly and honestly from their pulpit, even when they disagree with the message. For modern day preaching in the Free Church tradition to have the same kind integrity, the original understanding of the Free Pulpit will have to be reclaimed by both congregations and

ministers.

Making Connections

Covenant, Congregational Polity and Freedom of Conscience are all inextricably linked in what I call the curriculum of the Free Church. But the final "C" which ties them all together might be named Connections. Alice Walker wrote of these kinds of connections: "To acknowledge our ancestors means we are aware that we did not make ourselves, that the line stretches all the way back, perhaps to God; or to Gods. We remember them because it is an easy thing to forget; that we are not the first to suffer, rebel, fight, love and die. The grace with which we embrace life, in spite of the pain, the sorrows, is always a measure of what has gone before.."

An important part of the Curriculum of the Free Church is the process of connecting the historic roots of Covenant, Congregational Polity and Freedom of Conscience to our present day situation. The Adams and the Emmas and the Tylers and Sarahs growing up in our churches need to know that they are not alone in their faith. The religious tradition they share, far from being "at the margins" of our culture, has contributed and continues to contribute much to the best and most noble aspects of the American experience.

Increasingly however, history is a problem for young adults. I was teaching our four-part inquirers class, we call it "Roots," at All Souls two years ago. I was telling the class about our spiritual ancestors when one of the students, a young woman sitting in the back, raised her hand.

"You mean to tell me that we descended from the Pilgrims and the Puritans?"

I nodded affirmatively.

Her face fell and she replied. "Well, they were not what you'd call real warm fuzzy kind of folks. If you know what I mean."

I do know what she means. In this age of revisionist history, some of our ancestors have fared poorly. The Puritans were, well, puritanical! Some of our ancestors held slaves, persecuted Quakers, were brutal to Native Americans, executed innocent women and children on charges of witchcraft, and other things that make us squirm and shudder today. The Puritans and Pilgrims were not liberal in their theology, nor were they Unitarian or Universalists. So in what sense are they our ancestors, our spiritual forebears?

Covenant, Congregational Polity and Freedom of Conscience are liberal ideas that have come to us through religious institutions created by our Pilgrim and Puritan ancestors. Our way of being together in religious community is neither borrowed, or "made up on the spot," as my young friend Adam asserted, rather it is rooted in an important series of events that took place on these shores. These events that not only gave birth to the Free Church, but also to American democracy. To understand who we are as Twenty-first Century religious liberals, we have to know from whence we came. That does not mean just being able to rattle off a list of so called famous Unitarians and Universalist, but rather knowing the history of the institutional sources of the ideas that make us who we are today. It ought to be a lesson to us that individuals while blind to the injustices of their own times can in fact create institutional structures that enable

subsequent generations not only to recognize those injustices, but to seek to alleviate them. In theological language, this means that God's grace is even able to work in and through flawed people and their institutions.

Connecting with our history means understanding the common elements that enable us to embrace diversity without destroying ourselves. Knowing as well as owning the Shadow Side of our history, the parts that were not warm and fuzzy, does not mean we embrace or try to justify the mistakes and the brutalities of our past, but rather that we learn from them that even religion liberals are capable of errors of moral judgment. Connecting with our past ought to make us both proud and humble, and remind us that even our best intentions and deeds may seem less than noble from the vantage point of another century.

I am not unrealistic. I don't expect our Sunday School children to be able to rattle off the Cambridge Platform, or the Mayflower Compact. But I do not think it impossible to teach our children that our ways of being religious, our tolerance for diversity, our openness to truth from many sources, our commitment to justice and human dignity are the direct results of an evolution of ideas and institutions that grew up side by side with our American democratic tradition. They ought to know, whatever their own spiritual preferences, that their ancestors drew on lessons from the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and those scriptures are part of their heritage as well by virtue of that. We don't have to believe the Bible in order to acknowledge that our ancestors were influenced by it and drew inspiration from it as they built their institutional structures.

To my young friend Adam who asked me, "What difference does it make?" Connecting to our institutional past makes all the difference in knowing who we are and where we are going. There is so much more to learn, to understand and to apply in our congregations. There is much commonality amidst our diversity. In fact, it is the common structures of covenant, congregational polity and freedom of conscience that gives our diversity its power. It is needful therefore, to transmit the passwords from generation to generation."