

Democracy and Social Justice in the history of Unitarianism, Universalism and Unitarian Universalism—some brief reflections:

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Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community Conference
Chicago, Illinois, March 3, 2000

The American Unitarian Association was organized in Boston in May of 1825 and met annually in Boston until the merger with the Universalist Church of America in 1961. At its inception, the AUA was not an organization of congregations, but was comprised of interested individuals. Churches would not become members of the AUA until the 1880's and individuals would continue to be members of the AUA through to the time of merger with the Universalists in 1961. The function of the AUA was to promote growth and extension by means of publications, support of new and marginal congregations, and support for other institutions, such as colleges, theological schools and a social ministry in Boston

The General Conference of Unitarian Churches was organized in New York in 1865. This body was comprised of delegates from churches, and met in the fall of the year. It was more clearly concerned with standards of faith and practice, the fellowshiping of ministers, and the maintenance of discipline. It was the wording of the preamble to the Constitution of this body which provoked the establishment of an opposition group, the Free Religious Association—a clear indication of the theological nature of the Conference. The General Conference merged with the AUA in 1925. Subsequently, the pattern of organization and the priorities of the AUA seemed to prevail within the merged body.

The General Convention of Universalists (originally the New England Convention) dates from 1793 and continued in existence, under one name or another, until the merger with the AUA in 1961. (It became the Universalist Church of America in 1942.) This organization began as a delegate body with representation of churches. It met biennially at various sites around the country. Administratively it was weak, functioning to keep records, provide publications, religious education materials, lists of ministers, and to adjudicate disputes between the state conventions.

Universalist State Conventions were quasi-independent organizations, not the creatures of the national body. They were comprised of delegates from local churches, ministers, and officers of the convention. They remained close to and were dominated by local congregations, with power skewed toward

smaller congregations. They functioned to fellowship and discipline ministers, admit new congregations, raise and manage funds and keep records.

For those who believe in systems theory and the tendency of groups to recapitulate the conditions which prevailed at their origin, it may be interesting to consider a few facts: In the case of both the Unitarians and the Universalists, local churches pre-existed any denominational structures, and that sense of priority remains strong throughout both histories. The American Unitarian Association was the creature of an elite group and retained that aura throughout its history. The Universalist Church of America was the creature of local churches and retained that quality throughout its history.

There are recurrent themes in the history of these organizations. Over and over again, the AUA is accused of being too remote, too centralized, too unresponsive, too narrow in vision. When Samuel Eliot was elected president early in the 20th century, he announced a desire to decentralize the organization. When he resigned his post to become minister of the Arlington Street Church in Boston, the AUA was as highly centralized as ever, and in letters to his successors, Eliot confessed his conviction that decentralization was unlikely. In the 1930's, in reaction to what they perceived to be the unresponsive and remote administration of Louis Cornish, James Luther Adams and Fredrick May Eliot and others forced the establishment of a Commission of Appraisal, which, among other things, called for decentralizing the AUA. Eliot was elected to implement the agenda of the Commission. Before long, Adams was criticizing Eliot for an administration that was remote and too centralized, and Eliot was defending himself in language that sounds almost as if scripted by Louis Cornish.

Among the Universalists, the recurring complaints were that the UCA was too weak, too disorganized, too chaotic, too powerless, under-funded, uncoordinated and therefore, unable to accomplish any significant mission. Over the years, various attempts to reorganize (1870, 1899, 1942, etc.) were never very successful.

It might be noted that the greatest period of growth experienced by the Universalists was prior to 1870 and the attempt to create an efficient national body. The greatest period of growth for the AUA was probably in the 1950's when the Fellowship Movement offered a form of religious organization which deliberately defied any attempt at structure imposed from outside.

At the time of merger between the Unitarians and the Universalists (1961), voting at the general assembly was not based on a one-person-one-vote

rule. Rather it was according to stake-holding. Among the stake-holders who could vote were settled ministers, churches (by size), regions, associated member organizations, officers of the association and life members of the AUA. The cost of attending General Assemblies seemed to favor larger congregations, while the distribution of delegates seemed skewed to favor smaller congregations. In recent years, Assembly costs and changes in delegate distribution both favor larger churches and more affluent members, as well as an increased number of ministers. (It may be interesting to note that over the years, an increasing number of local congregations have instituted “poll taxes” in determining who can vote—i.e., limiting the franchise to those who have contributed financially to the church. This is a practice that was not as common earlier in the history of the movement.)

As important as who votes is the question of what they are allowed to vote on. To explore what has been happening in the UUA in the years since merger, I will look at three areas.

Budget. I would argue that a budget is only secondarily a financial document; it is first and foremost a moral document. Therefore, control of the budget process is a matter of deep concern for a democratic institution.

In the early years of the UUA, the General Assembly considered, amended, adjusted, and approved the budget of the Association, thus instructing the board on policies and priorities. It was the exercise of this power that was invoked when the General Assembly, in 1968, instructed the Board of the Association to pay \$250,000 per year for four years to the Black Affairs Council to fund programs in the Black community. Though the Board was uncomfortable with this decision, it eventually conceded that it was bound by the direction of the Assembly. It approved the expenditure, but did not adjust the budget either by trimming other areas or finding additional revenues, thus hastening, if not creating a fiscal crisis.

In the face of the looming fiscal crisis, the General Assembly was convinced to adopt a rule which required that no additions could be made to the Association’s budget unless the source of the funds could be identified—either new money or, more likely, cuts in other budget areas. This policy virtually assured a constituency against any significant change in the budget as presented. Subsequently, the UUA legal council issued an opinion that, as he interpreted the constitution of the UUA, actions by the General Assembly are advisory only and not binding on the Board of the Association.

The result is that the Budget has virtually disappeared from the General Assembly and determination of priorities and policies and uses of the Association's resources is now largely in the hands of the Board and ultimately, the paid staff.

Resolutions process. (Who has access to the agenda.) In the years immediately following the merger, any church, by action of its congregation or its board, could submit a resolution to the Business Committee for consideration by the General Assembly. The Business Committee chose those items it believed were important enough for the Assembly's consideration and which could be handled in the time allotted. However, the decision of the committee to exclude an item could be overridden by a petition containing a total of 100 names representing 10 churches.

Over time, this resolution process was deemed too unwieldy. It generated too much interest and involvement from the churches; too many items were presented for the assembly to consider thoughtfully and some really radical proposals sometimes slipped through the net. And so, over the years, additional screens have been gradually added until we reach the present Byzantine set of rules. The result is a homogenization of resolutions, carefully screened of the outrageous and unconventional and an incredible level of apathy about the entire process.

Ministerial Fellowship Committee: (Control of Standards): In the early years of the UUA, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee was a committee of the General Assembly, answerable to the Assembly. The by-laws guaranteed individuals a hearing before the Committee, and provided the right of appeal from decision of the Committee to the Board of Trustees or to the General Assembly itself. While this unwieldy appeal process was seldom invoked, it signified that the question of standards for ministry was firmly rooted in the association of congregations and the committee was answerable to that association through the General Assembly.

Now, the Committee on Ministerial Fellowship is a committee of the Board of Trustees. The only appeal from a decision of the Committee is to a special Board of Appeals. By by-law, the Board of Appeals must uphold any decision of the Committee unless it can be demonstrated that a manifest injustice has been done—i.e., the Committee has violated its own rules. There is no appeal from a decision by the Board of Appeals, and no means by which to make the Committee accountable to the General Assembly or to its constituent congregations. The Committee is responsible to the Board for its rules, its

standards, its processes, and its decisions. Congregations are specifically excluded from knowledge of or participation in the process.

I would argue that we are witness to the steady consolidation of power in the UUA and with it profound confusion about the nature of our polity. Increasingly, the UUA functions like a denomination rather than as association of congregations. The concept of covenant has replaced our historic understanding of compact as the basis of our movement. The rights of churches are usurped in a variety of subtle ways. For example, fellowship, which is the prerogative of the Board's Committee, has replaced ordination, which is the prerogative of the local congregation, as the critical determinant of qualification for ministry. (Students, who have yet to graduate, or be called or settled or ordained and who are not serving congregations or engaged in a community ministry are regularly addressed as Rev. by the UUA as soon as they have been granted fellowship—a minor, but not insignificant symbol of the steady power shift.)

What is more, the General Assembly has ceased to be a significant legislative body and has become a pep-rally. It is a venue for showcasing the Administration's programs, and the programs of affiliated groups. Its votes increasingly become rubber-stamps for programs and priorities proposed by the UUA staff. It is an interesting, sometimes exciting and occasionally useful event. It is scarcely an example of democracy in action.

Perhaps it is of some symbolic significance that in 1969, six candidates vied for the office of President of the UUA—most, if not all of them, parish ministers not working at the Association's headquarters. As of this writing there are three candidates seeking that office at the next election. All of them are from UUA headquarters.

This trend is particularly important to recognize when we consider the history of our movement in the area of social justice. Despite our penchant to picture our movement as radically committed to social justice, the fact is that as a movement we have been religiously liberal and socially conservative and therefore, throughout most of our history, the real work of social justice has been done by individuals, often marginalized precisely because of their commitment to social justice. In the great crisis of the nineteenth century, the issue of slavery, the Unitarian movement was immobilized by its social conservatism. Individuals, like Samuel J. May, and Theodore Parker and Lydia Maria Child took bold stands, but they were not supported by the churches. The Universalists, despite the ordination of women to their ministry, were never able to pass a significant resolution on women's rights. It

is unlikely that continued consolidation of power in the UUA will produce unconventional thinking about or radical responses to the issues of our time. Social Justice, for the foreseeable future, will remain the responsibility of individuals and special groups who retain their independence and thus, their ability to prod from outside the central power structure.