

Institutional Change as Contemporary Unitarian Universalist Ecclesiology: Engaging Jürgen Moltmann

Rev. Oscar Sinclair

Prepared for DM 609, June 2020

Context: Unitarian Universalism and the Challenge of Institutional Change

It continues to be a complex challenge to think and write about theology as a Unitarian Universalist at a Methodist Seminary. While the Unitarian Universalist Association's historical roots lie in liberal Christianity, its modern expression is not distinctly Christian, and I serve a predominantly humanist congregation. It has been some time since I engaged deeply with Christian theology, and finding ways to bring Moltmann's writing directly into my ministry is, in Moltmann's phrasing 'a continual problem and a continual opportunity.'¹

While the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, where I serve, is primarily humanist, our traditions are deeply informed by Christianity, in ways that are not always obvious to our members. The rhythms of our liturgy and preaching are basically protestant, and the framing of our theological questioning still reflects the 18th century Enlightenment and Transcendentalist movements that informed our founding generation. There is a push against and pull to Christianity in our tradition,² almost as if Christianity is Unitarian Universalism's 'original, enduring, and final partner in history.'³ In the same way that Christianity is distinct from the Jewish faith and yet cannot be separated historically from it, we Unitarian Universalists are caught up in the history of our relationship to Christianity, even as

our theologies remain -and grow even more-distinct.

The Unitarian Universalist Association is in the midst of our most significant theological realignment since the 1961 merger between the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. Three years ago a controversial hiring decision at the national level highlighted the gap between our stated aspirations as an anti-racist organization and the lived experience of religious professional of color. Over the course of eight weeks the president of the Association, the director of the office of congregational life, and the executive director of the UU Minister's Association resigned, along with several other long time national staff members.⁴

In the aftermath, the UUA named a Commission on Institutional Change (CoIC) to investigate and record what took place, to audit the power structures within Unitarian Universalism, to recommend strategies for anti-oppression work, and to ground their work in theological reflection. The Commission's final report, *Widening the Circle of Concern*⁵ was published last month, and contains over 150 discrete recommendations and areas of further inquiry, ranging from our congregational polity, to funding theological reflection, to centering the experience of BIPOC members in our congregations.

Relatedly, the UUA Board of Trustees named a new Commission in June, 2020, to explore

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 106.

² A recent (6/29/20) representative email from a congregant reads: "You attended the UU Christian fellowship at GA. What does being a Christian mean to you? I think of Christianity as being synonymous with trinitarianism, and the belief in the infallibility of the Bible."

³ Moltmann, *The Church*, 135.

⁴ Susan Hogan, "Turmoil over diversity strikes Unitarian Universalist Association," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2017,

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/04/03/turmoil-over-diversity-strikes-unitarian-universalist-association/>

⁵ *Widening the Circle of Concern: Report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change*, (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2020), https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/widening_the_circle-text_with_covers.pdf

and recommend revisions to Article II of the UUA bylaws. Unitarian Universalism is, in theology and practice, non-creedal. Freedom of conscience is dearly held, but part of Article II is a list of seven principals which the member congregations ‘covenant to affirm and promote.’ These principles are the clearest statement of that which is commonly held among us, and are what the new commission is charged to recommend changes to.

In short, this is a moment of deep institutional flux within the denomination I serve in. The nature of the institution and our collective commitments, as well as what we claim in common, are being explicitly questioned in ways they have not been since 1961. Whatever form my final thesis takes three years from now, it will be in the context of an Association that is wrestling with questions of ecclesiology and leadership.

Individualism and Leadership

“Such ambiguity and a concomitant tentativeness in articulating what we are about religiously is presently perhaps our greatest liability and the greatest obstacle to Unitarian Universalism achieving the fulfillment of its potential as an empowering and liberating faith for the twenty-first century. The fear that any such articulation somehow threatens the integrity or right of conscience of any individual is institutionally disabling and must be overcome by mutual trust and a sense of common purpose, the belief that we are joined together in religious association for more than merely instrumental reasons.”
—Rev. Earl Holt⁶

“The social realization of these ideas is a continual problem and a continual opportunity”
—Jürgen Moltmann⁷

Much of the Commission on Institutional Change’s report concerns the tension Earl Holt describes above. Unitarian Universalism has, for the last several generations, emphasized a highly individual experience of faith- what Soong Chan Rah describes as “a collection of individuals who happen to be in the same room. Worship is just

between the individual and God, and the church service exists to help facilitate that individual communion.”⁸ This emphasis on the individual, as Rah observes, is inseparable from the cultural location of our denomination: largely white, educated, and professional.

Leadership can be understood as the intersection between the individual and the institution- where individual vision meets the culture of an institution in its particular time, place, and history. Leadership exists in the tension between the vision of the individual and the context of the culture, that is the ‘continual problem and continual opportunity’ of ministry.

What is complex and difficult, in this moment, is finding where healthy leadership exists within this place and moment in the denomination’s history. The CoIC stated this as a guiding principle for its work: “To keep Unitarian Universalism alive, we must center the voices that have been silenced or drowned out and dismantle elitist and exclusionary white privilege, which inhibits connection and creativity.”⁹ If Unitarian Universalism is a salad bowl then we have, to use Rah’s very Nebraskan image, been drowning our diverse flavors in the creamy ranch¹⁰ of whiteness and a theology based on individualism. The complexity and difficulty, for me, come in the realization that I am the creamy ranch in Rah’s image. What does it mean to serve in leadership in this faith, even as we are called to decenter voices like mine?

Towards a Unitarian Universalist Ecclesiology

“In Articulating Your UU Faith, Barbara Wells ten Hove and Jaco ten Hove identify the first and seventh Principles of Unitarian Universalism as the “pillar Principles.” [7] The first and seventh Principles affirm to covenant and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of all” and the fact that we all live in an “interdependent web of existence...” Yet over the decades since the consolidation of Unitarians and Universalists, an overemphasis on individual exploration and experience as the primary, if not sole center of religious experience developed. This

⁶ Earl Holt, “Commission on Appraisal presentation to the 2005 Unitarian Universalist General Assembly” in *Widening the Circle of Concern*, 7.

⁷ Moltmann, *The Church*, 106.

⁸ Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 34.

⁹ *Widening the Circle of Concern*, xix.

¹⁰ Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 86.

centering of the individual decenters the communal as a locus of theological exploration.”
—Commission on Institutional Change¹¹

“No life can be understood from its own standpoint alone. As long as it lives, it exists in living relationship to other lives, and therefore in contexts of time and with perspectives of hope. It is these that constitute in the first place a living being’s unique vitality, openness, and capacity for communication.”
—Jürgen Moltmann¹²

The seven principles in Article II of the UUA’s bylaws follow an implicit structure. They begin with the individual and each person’s inherent worth and dignity, and then begin to zoom out. Each principle draws the circle wider, until the final seventh principle proclaims that all of us are part of an interconnected web of existence.¹³ Much of contemporary Unitarian Universalist theology lives in the tension between these two principles: each person has inherent worth, and we are interconnected. In the welcome video we play as part of a new member program at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, I express it this way: “that is the core of what it is we proclaim, and everything else is about how those two things have consequences in our lives: how do we actually live lives where we recognize dignity with each other, where we recognize each other’s worth, and we recognize that what happens to you matters to me. That’s everything. That’s every Sunday morning, that’s every committee meeting, every action we do in public, everything we teach our kids.”¹⁴

We might think of a Unitarian Universalist ecclesiology following a similar pattern, widening from the individual to the associational. We begin with the individual, both as an element of polity and a locus of theological exploration. Religion happens through relationship- if we focus solely on the individual’s theological exploration, there is little reason for Unitarian Universalism as an

institution. We are constantly in relationship with each other, growing in our understanding of the divine through fellowship with each other. In Moltmann’s language,¹⁵ “the community and fellowship of Christ which is the church comes about ‘in the Holy Spirit’. The Spirit is this fellowship.”¹⁶

Unitarian Universalist congregations are democratic. Our democratic nature is not simply a convenient organizing principle,¹⁷ but a reflection of where we collectively locate the divine. We catch glimpses of God (or the divine, or beauty, or many other names in our congregations) through relationship, and the congregation is a covenantal, democratic relationship. If God is present through the work of our congregations in history, it is through the process of deliberation and collective discernment. For this reason ordination in our tradition does not depend on apostolic succession or even a denominational committee. Ministers are ordained by vote of a local congregation, often the first congregation they are called to serve.

At its largest scale, this relational path of collective discernment looks like four thousand Unitarian Universalists gathering on a series of Zoom calls in the midst of a global pandemic to do the business of our Association. In practice this feels to me like an *ecclesia* in the truest sense: a gathering of citizens in the public square, a gathered assembly for both worship and discernment.

As the Greek *agora* was often raucous, with passionate political disagreement and philosophical speculation existing side by side, so to are our gatherings. “The unity of the congregation is a unity in freedom.” Moltmann writes, “It must not be confused with unanimity, let alone uniformity in perception, feeling, or morals... this unity is an evangelical unity, not a legal one.”¹⁸ We are united in relationship, if not in unanimity.

¹¹ *Widening the Circle of Concern*, 8-9.

¹² Moltmann, *The Church*, 133.

¹³ “UUA Bylaws,” Unitarian Universalist Association, last modified 2019, https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/uua_bylaws_2019.pdf

¹⁴ Promotional Material, Unitarian Church of Lincoln, available at <https://vimeo.com/306310063>

¹⁵ One of the significant unanticipated losses for Unitarians in abandoning the Trinity as unscriptural is the depth of images of the divine as fundamentally relational.

¹⁶ Moltmann, *The Church*, 33.

¹⁷ Or, I pray, a simply party affiliation.

¹⁸ Moltmann, *The Church*, 343.

Dialog Open to the World

If truth is ‘undemonstratable’, then continual striving after truth, even with the admitted risk of error, stands higher than its possession.

—Jürgen Moltmann¹⁹

Promoting unity, understanding, and mutual support among diverse faith traditions in Lancaster County.

—Mission Statement, Faith Coalition of Lancaster County²⁰

If Unitarian Universalism’s emphasis on the individual search for truth and meaning has contributed to our difficulty in articulating a common theology and ecclesiology, it has also helped us participate fully in interfaith dialog and organizing. Gotthold Lessing lived a generation earlier than Unitarianism’s founding, but the parable of the three rings and the ideal of productive tolerance²¹ would sound familiar and comfortable to most of our members. If, ultimately, the final arbiter of theological truth is individual conscience, then interfaith dialog becomes an opportunity for growth rather than a potential threat.

The important piece for us is to maintain the particularity of our tradition, and to respect the particularity of traditions we are in dialog with, rather than appropriating practices that are not authentically ours. This is a fine line to walk at times. “Fruitful dialogue involves clear knowledge about the identity of one’s own faith on the one hand; but on the other it requires a feeling of one’s own incompleteness and a real sense of need for fellowship with the other.”²² Alternatively, Robin Meyers frames this same tension more directly: “...one can embrace one’s own tradition, deeply and unapologetically, without invalidating the religious tradition of another.”²³

In some ways this is a digression from the ecclesiological thrust of this paper. At the same time, this question of particularity and incompleteness are central to sorting out the ‘salad’ of our tradition, placing the creamy ranch to the side

and letting each culture and tradition within our faith room to exist on their own terms. While Rah’s context is much different from that of the UUA’s Commission on Institutional Change, they share an emphasis on culturally particular expressions of faith.

There is also a very practical reason to include interfaith dialog in my final paper for this class. While it is likely that my eventual D.Min thesis will focus on some aspect of either my congregational or denominational context, I also recently began a term as the president of the Faith Coalition of Lancaster County. The work of revitalizing the coalition has already been the focus of one project for this degree, and it seems likely that it will continue as a thread throughout the next several years of my ministry.

Laying Foundations

Marcus Borg reminds us that there are four meanings of the word “faith” in the history of Christianity, and only one of them, assensus, has anything to do with intellectual assent, or faith as a “head trip.”

—Robin Meyers²⁴

It is probably glib to observe that the need for a theological foundation for a D.Min thesis is, itself, an important and unusual statement in my tradition. Over the last two generations, Unitarian Universalism has emphasized individual searches for truth and meaning as central to our lived faith. This has affected aspects of our denomination from congregational polity to seminary hiring, but it has at least two distinct and countervailing effects on Unitarian Universalist theology:

1. In our emphasis on individual belief, we have leaned heavily, in our theology and practice, on *assensus*: the things that we believe or disbelieve, on a personal level. Individual Unitarian Universalists are quick to define, in intellectual terms, exactly what they do not believe in.

¹⁹ Moltmann, *The Church*, 133.

²⁰ “Mission Statement,” Faith Coalition of Lancaster County, last modified 2019, <https://www.lancasterfaith.org>

²¹ Moltmann, *The Church*, 155.

²² Moltmann, *The Church*, 159.

²³ Robin Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus*, (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 180.

²⁴ Meyers, *Saving Jesus*, 37.

2. At the same time, the diversity of *assensus* among our membership has hampered our ability to develop a coherent theology and ecclesiology.

I am not immune to this: I struggled with Moltmann (and to some extent Meyers and Rah) trying to get past what I do not believe, to find places of engagement and shared journey. Yet if I am the ‘resident theologian’ at the Unitarian Church of Lincoln, it is not enough to simply define my own beliefs and not engage with the questions of this class.

Ecclesiology is going to be a component of my work in this program, up to and including the final project. The work of the Commission on Institutional Change, the challenge of redefining our core principles, and the work that I am doing with the Faith Coalition are major projects, and each are questions of institutions, rather than individual belief. I joked during the intensive for DM609 that a final project for me might be writing an ecclesiology of Unitarian Universalism, but I am increasingly sure this is one of the central tasks for my generation of UU ministers.

Works Cited

- Faith Coalition of Lancaster County. "Mission Statement." Accessed July 8, 2020.
<https://www.lancasterfaith.org>
- Hogan, Susan. "Turmoil over diversity strikes Unitarian Universalist Association." *Washington Post*, April 3, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/04/03/turmoil-over-diversity-strikes-unitarian-universalist-association/>
- Meyers, Robin. *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.
- Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*. Translated by Margaret Kohl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Rah, Soong-Chan. *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- Unitarian Church of Lincoln, Promotional Material, accessed July 10, 2020.
<https://vimeo.com/306310063>
- Unitarian Universalist Association. "UUA Bylaws." Last modified 2019.
https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/uua_bylaws_2019.pdf
- Widening the Circle of Concern: Report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2020.
https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/widening_the_circle-text_with_covers.pdf