

# A Sense of Community; A Community of Sense

by Rev. Robert Edward Greene

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The Unitarian Universalist Church is in some respects the same as other churches. In other respects, it is very different.

What differentiates the Unitarian Universalist Church most, I think, is that it is a community of sense. We have refused to accept religious concepts just because they have been handed down to us. We have insisted that religious beliefs ought to make sense -- to make sense within the confines of the real world as we know it and as we are able to learn about it. No belief can be religious, we have asserted, which is not in accord with human reason. Religion should be sensible and religion should be comprehensible to the human mind.

William Ellery Channing laid down the foundation of that belief in his Baltimore sermon in 1819, stating it in terms of an older Christian theology. If God made Man, said Channing, if God gave him a brain, then surely God would not have communicated with him except in a manner he would have understood. The Bible, then, if it is the word of God must be interpreted through God-given reason. Doctrines, such as the trinity, which are admitted even by their proponents to be humanly incomprehensible, cannot be from a God who gave to this species its capacity to think.

Since God gave that capacity to think to each individual, Channing continued, then the responsibility for thinking and for understanding God belongs to each person -- not to any church, not to any hierarchy.

Further, Channing went on, since God by definition is morally perfect, then only those directions which are morally good can be from God. God himself is the model which human beings must seek to understand and seek to follow. And Jesus, Channing added, is that human being who most perfectly achieved that ability to understand God and to follow in his ways.

Thus were stated the three lasting foundations of Unitarianism Universalism: the application of reason to religion, individual freedom of belief, and a commitment to the moral good.

Channing, as a man of the early 19th century, hardly realized, or could have realized, where his principles would carry us. Channing hardly conceived, or could have conceived, the extent of knowledge which would be gained in the next century and a half about our world and the way the universe functions. Science was about to discover realms of information rarely if ever matched in the past. The Christian west was about to become aware of other religions in a way that would make it far more difficult to assert that Christianity was the one and only exclusively acceptable faith. Yet because of these principles which Channing and others had set forth, and which our forbears in Europe also had recognized three hundred years earlier, Unitarians Universalists were prepared to grasp this new knowledge and to utilize it to create a religious concept vastly different from anything that had preceded it.

The evidence gathered and adduced by Charles Darwin, even more than the theory he would propound in his book, *On the Origin of the Species*, raised serious questions as to whether the universe really had been created by God. A combination of scientific discoveries about the functioning of the universe together with a new awareness of religious mythologies would begin to raise serious doubts indeed even about the very existence of God!

Some Unitarians Universalists responded by redefining "God" to fit the new concepts, to suggest that God rather than being a person, as long had been the teachings of Judeo-Christianity, was to be identified as the universe or universal law or love or the good, and so on. Others suggested that the God concept no longer was relevant, that religion in fact is centered on human beings and that human beings alone controlled their world and must accept responsibility for their world.

While no absolute consensus ever would result, more and more Unitarians Universalists came to adopt the humanist perspective, even while acknowledging tolerance for the more traditionally phrased interpretations. Today there can be little doubt that the notion of human responsibility for the destiny of the world is part of the sense of community in a community of sense.

Certainly people always have asked questions about how did the world come to be, how did life come to be, how does the universe function.

But where once the responses to those questions could only be in terms of religious imaginings that in the past gave rise to so many myths, today a community of sense turns to science which by a process of investigation and learning can provide a far more rational and provable response.

True, science still cannot answer all our questions. So more than ever before, it behooves us to admit those things we do not know -- yet! It is that admission that we do not know that spurs us to further investigation and further learning. It is that admission that we do not know that also inspires us to exercise tolerance for disparate views, for we are aware that knowledge of the truth often is uncertain and the discovery of that knowledge frequently is dependent upon the free exchange of ideas.

In a community of sense, obviously then the Bible cannot be seen as the answer to all questions, for the Bible is a book of its own time. We are prepared to recognize the Bible as a library of significant works in history, of literature, on moral philosophy. But at the same time we would insist that the Bible is only one of such works and we would insist that all books, including the Bible, must be examined and evaluated in the context of the greater knowledge and new learning we have achieved today.

It is that view of scripture as a work of the human mind, even if inspired, as part of a vast body of knowledge, both ancient and modern, that differentiates Unitarianism Universalism from other churches.

We admire the prophetic voices who sought to make religion meaningful in human life. We would follow in their efforts. If we refuse to acknowledge them as divine, they stand a vital reminder to us of what committed human beings can be and what committed human beings can do.

In a community of sense, Unitarians Universalists reject any attempt to define religion in terms of tradition or ritual.

As important as anything to us is the very concept of what is religion. We envision religion as encompassing all of life, as being a direction for the way we live. We perceive religion as a unity, uniting all elements of life in a comprehensive and comprehensible individualized process of living.

It is that understanding of what religion is that leads us to the conclusion that moral concern is the essence of the religious quest. Morality really is nothing more than a guide as to how to live as an individual with others in our community.

It is our conviction, based upon our perception of human nature, of the human potential, of human relationships, that the best way of life, the proper way of living -- the moral way -- is mutual support. We believe that a concern for one another, cooperation, peace not only are desirable but appropriate and natural.

We look, therefore, for methods by which we and our society can lead towards such ends. We become actively engaged in working for such purposes -- in whatever way, through whatever organizations promote those ends -- because our religious convictions and our religious living demand it. Understandably we cannot be everywhere; each of us has to choose where to put our energies. But you will find Unitarians Universalists involved in almost all the social causes that are committed to human well-being and you will find the Unitarian Universalist Church, when it is at its best, in the forefront of committed stands for peace, for equality, for justice wherever such are demanded. Some say we are too political. I prefer to think that we are being properly moral. We are realistic enough to know that morality, and immorality, occurs through the aegis of social institutions and that means the political process. We believe, then, not merely in the right of citizens to partake of the decision-making process in our society; we believe it is the obligation of every individual to make his or her presence felt in a constructive way to attain appropriate ends.

This, we believe, is to make a community of sense which brings us together in a sense of community.

We commonly say that religion is an individual thing, that each individual determines his own religious beliefs. That is true -- only persons as individuals can decide what to believe and how to practice those beliefs. But it also is true that from time immemorial persons have come together in religious groupings.

I would suggest that this has resulted less from theology than from human nature. People need each other. People want to share with each other. People require mutual company and mutual support. There is inherent in each individual a sense of community. The church has made manifest in life that sense of community, created within itself that sense of community, enhanced among its participants a sense of community.

When Moses led a group of slaves out of Egypt, they had a sense of community arising out of their common slavery and perhaps their ethnic origin. But once in the desert, once deprived of the security of urban living, once they had lost their common enemy, their sense of community was rent.

Still, if we follow the story of Exodus closely, we can see how Moses, perhaps with the aid of his father-in-law, Jethro, used religion to re-create a sense of community. Moses brought the escapees together as the chosen people of their own God. He united them as a separated and special society. He and their God offered them new promises, a new hope, not for each individual, but only for individuals within the community and as a community.

Without this sense of community, Judaism hardly could have survived so many centuries and so much trauma. Indeed what survives in Judaism today is that sense of community -- a sense of historical/cultural/ethnic/communal unity far more than any theological agreement or active participation in a synagogue or ritual.

Now let me move to the opposite extreme -- to the rise of fundamentalism. Historically, fundamentalism, of whatever denominational persuasion, has arisen in times of economic and political stress. So it is hardly surprising that in the 1980's and 1990's we should find a revival of fundamentalism in Islam and in Buddhism as well as in Christianity. All these groups make the same offer -- a heightened sense of community identity and a revived sense of hope and promise -- but a hope and promise dependent upon the community and upon participation in the community.

No church can exist without some sense of community. That is true of denominational bodies and it is true of local churches. It is true of fundamentalists and it is true of the liberal church.

A sense of community goes beyond a belief system, beyond any series of ritualized practices. It involves people to people contact. It involves a process we call socialization. It involves a willingness to commit one's self to others, which really is the essence of friendship. It involves a perception of warmth, not just on the part of we who have been here for a while, but by those who visit us; it means that they see we enjoy each other, but also that we welcome them to join and to become a part of us.

That such a sense of community exists here is clear. It is reflected in more than sixty-five years of continuous being. It is reflected in members whose participation is of long and devoted standing. It is reflected in the desire of members who having moved still retain their affiliation and contact here.

What is important is that we recognized that sense of community. What is essential is that we understand the importance of that sense of community to the meaning and the meaningfulness of our church. What is required is that we expand that sense of community by ensuring that we express it to others who would enjoy sharing it with us, express it not just in words alone but in feeling, in exuding a sense of welcome and warmth, of friendship and inclusivity.

That is what has made the church important in people's lives. That is what made the church a significant part of the village and of the neighborhood. Here was a place where people gathered -- gathered to share in friendship, gathered to share in hope, and, no less important, gathered to share in fear, in sorrow, and in comfort. The church provided a sense of humanity, of human concern, of sympathy and compassion and support. It did that when it was Catholic and it did that when it became Protestant. It did it through the Minor Reformed Church which established Unitarianism in Poland and it has been done through the four hundred year old Unitarian Church in Transylvania. And the

church still does it, when it does as it should. It still provides the coming together of humans concerned for one another whether it be Catholic or Baptist or Unitarian Universalist ; whether it be in a noble cathedral or in a modern glass structure or in a plain brick building; whether it be in Boston or Middletown or Stockton.

The church as a community does not just happen. It occurs only as the result of individual human beings creating their own commitment and enacting that commitment in their lives. It occurs only when people make up their minds to bring that commitment with them into the community. It occurs only if in that community members remember their continuing obligation as an individual to accept their responsibilities to the community. It occurs only when those who choose to unite create out of that sense of community a covenant of respect and tolerance for each other. It occurs only when the covenanters themselves are prepared to act on behalf of the basic principles that form the foundation of the community.

Only when all these elements come together have we created a church whose mission is evident, whose purpose is strong, whose service is clear, whose dynamics function effectively, because people realize they are the community, they are the church.

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