

Are We Alone?
Getting to know our “sisters” and “brothers” in faith from White Stone
to Tokyo.
by Bob Weekley

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock
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Bob will discuss the worldwide Unitarian and Universalist movements that have continued to expand since the sixteenth century. Thoughtful people from many cultures and religious traditions share the same questions about the big questions of life. A movement toward faith, based on a rational spirituality has continued to spread. As an example, Bob will share his recent journey with Elaine to UUFR’s own “Partner Church” in Walmsley, England.

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Religion is a central feature of the history of homo sapiens. When we consider our development as a species that is gifted with consciousness and with an ability to think conceptually – an ability that is unique among all the species on Earth, we are confronted by the outsized role of religion governing human behavior. Religions have provided explanations for the understanding of our world. Religions established the bases for the laws and rules human tribes have formulated, Religions gave human tribes the rationale for who governs and who is governed. Religions told human tribes who is their enemy so they can be killed. Religions dictated who can love whom, who can marry whom. Religions told their followers how the universe came about and how the universe functions.

This may sound like a huge leap, but think about it. We have evidence that even before writing was invented, there was belief that some kinds of higher powers were at work – or play. Ancient stone monuments and temples stand in silent testimony to early beliefs that caused people to endure mighty exertions and sacrifice to move huge stones to build temples, or to dig great pits and cover them with mounds of earth and stone to sanctify human remains that were accompanied by treasures. The religious leaders even killed fellow humans or animals to accompany the dead on their journey.

Civilizations around the world, even to the present, have been governed either by a religious figurehead or by a combination of political and religious authority. This applied to Chinese and Japanese emperors, European kings and popes, the original kings of peoples in the Americas, and witch doctors and tribal chiefs. Middle eastern tribes of the Bible killed each other over worshipping the “wrong” god.

Only in last few hundred years, a smidgen of time in the tens of thousands of years of human history, has resistance to rule by religions emerged.

Why talk about our ancient religious legacy now? Why does it matter how we got to this point? The point is – and this is what intrigues me – this religious evolution is still underway. We, Unitarian Universalists, are in the forefront. Maybe you did not consider yourself a rebel from the ancient order, or maybe you did.

I enjoy thinking about the tumultuous path of Christianity since a man named Jesus was reported to have walked the roads and byways of Judea. Within two hundred years after he was killed for his rebellious teaching, a new world religion had formed with the blessing of the Roman Emperor Constantine. That new religion bore less and less resemblance to what Jesus the teacher had taught. A committee formed by the Roman government held conferences to decide which of the many competing beliefs about Jesus' message would be included in the new religion. The conferences argued about whether Jesus was a god or a man, about whether there was one god or a trinity of three. They crafted a religious system based on the concept that all persons were guilty of Adam's original sin, and that all humans were to be eternally punished if they did not accept the new religion – a far cry from the teachings of the Jesus described in the New Testament gospels.

As the ages rolled by the new religion became harsher, more extreme, and financially corrupt. Priests could sell passage to heaven. Great edifices were built. The leaders wore kingly jewels, crowns, and expensive robes. Their subjects were sent abroad to wage war on non-Christians until – we are told – blood ran in the streets. European Jews were banished and killed.

Such excesses eventually led to a rebellion against the established church as the Protestant reformation occurred. Then came an era of warfare across many nations as the Protestants and Roman Catholics fought each other. And, as was so evident on our recent visit to Northern Ireland, they still are. We observed the wall that runs through the center of Belfast to keep the two sides apart.

So, out of this world of religious sect fighting religious sect emerged a revolutionary concept of religion. It began in Eastern Europe in the 1500's with the heretical belief that there was one god, not three. Unitarianism was born. Such a small step, but the first step toward building a new way of believing – a religion based on reason, love, and humanity.

As one would expect, this liberal concept was a threat to the status quo. Its leaders were killed, our Unitarian predecessor, Michael Servetus, even was burned at the stake for spreading rational belief. But that tiny flame became a flaming beacon that spread light around the world. As scientific understanding expanded there was no need to explain such phenomena as earthquakes, flood, hurricane, or plague as God's punishment. For the Unitarians such ideas were replaced by the ideas of the enlightenment, and the idea that we should focus on how we can make our world a better place. Gradually many have accepted this Unitarian belief that we humans have common challenges in living and making the world a better place. Many have come to realize that we all are "brothers and sisters" with more in common than what might divide us. It still is not universal, but I believe it is the movement of the future.

As Unitarian Universalists, we are clearly a minority faith in a world that has been dominated for centuries by dogmatic religion. Nowhere are we a majority, or even a very large minority. World history has been dominated by the religious-political alliances – “Church and Crown.” Laws in most nations, including the United States, reflect religious dogma. Unitarianism has been characterized by nonconformity to this traditional alliance of religion and political control. We share such views not only with each other but also across borders and around the world. We are the skeptics. We believe we can find our own definition of “the divine.” We believe in “the inherent dignity and worth of EVERY person.” We believe in our own “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

We encourage each other in our courageous stand by coming together. Beyond our small fellowship here we affiliate with the UUs of our geographic region as members of the Tidewater UU Cluster of churches. Nationally, we are part of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Some of our members have attended those joyful annual General Assemblies of the UUA. Beyond the national U.S. perspective, we have the opportunity to affiliate with Unitarians around the world who tend to share our humanist embrace of life.

This movement is very notable in a time that so many have been disenchanted by the old established religions. As Rev. Jim Moseley put it in a talk here recently, this is a time of the “nones” and the “dones” – more folks who don’t profess any particular religion (the “nones”), and those who have left their religion (the “dones”). On the contrary, the UU Association in the U.S. has some 2,000 thriving churches. Twenty years ago there was no UU church between Newport News to Fredericksburg. Now UUFR has grown from zero to sixty-some enthusiastic members.

The organization that promotes and supports global affiliation is the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council (UUPCC). The UUPCC is an independent organization affiliated with the UUA. It is supported by donations from individuals, from UU churches, and by the UUA itself.

The UUPCC Vision:

We envision a worldwide Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist community that promotes peace, justice, and liberty for all, supported by partnerships that are integral to congregational life.

The UUPCC plays several roles. It not only organizes partnering relationships between churches in the U.S. and those of other countries, it also arranges group exchanges between churches in the U.S. and in other countries. Such exchanges include musical groups, service groups, and student exchanges at elementary, high school, and university level. UUPCC provides scholarships to assist people who would like to travel on a visit – a “pilgrimage” – to some international UU church. The original Unitarian churches of Transylvania in Romania are typical chosen destinations for individuals and groups. Typical working groups travel to less developed countries such as in Africa or the Philippines to help with community projects.

Our own fellowship joined the UUPCC and expressed our interest in partnering. UUPCC found a Unitarian congregation in England that expressed an interest in a U.S. partnership and seemed to be an ideal partner. The Walmsley Unitarian Chapel in Egerton is in a rural village area of northern England. It has fifty-some members as we do. After we were introduced to each other by the questionnaires we submitted, our respective leadership boards decided to approve the relationship.

This past summer, Elaine and I made a visit to the Walmsley Unitarian Chapel at the tail end of our trip to the British Isles. We were warmly received and spent a couple of wonderful days there. I will conclude my talk with some photos of our visit.

In contrast to our own UU Fellowship of the Rappahannock which is about 20 years old, the Walmsley church is more than 350 years old. In the 1600s Walmsley was inhabited by Presbyterians – a group not in conformity with the official Church of England. The English “Act of Uniformity” in 1662 required all clergymen to use the Prayer Book of the English church – so the Presbyterians of Walmsley were forbidden to worship in their own way. As noted in our bulletin, the early adherents had to assemble secretly.

For the Walmsley Presbyterians, as religious nonconformists in England, it was a logical transition to the even more nonconforming spirit of Unitarianism. They were eventually allowed to build their own chapel and to worship in their own way. Thus, the beautiful church I will show you was built in 1713.

I was curious about the beliefs of the UK Unitarians. They hold many beliefs that we would find congenial to ours. The traditional concept of “Unitarian,” meaning one, rather than three gods, has been broadened to embrace the oneness of humanity, the oneness of the world, and the oneness of the independent web of life. They believe that faith should be free from the constraints imposed by others and that no one should dictate what another person may or may not believe. There is no “party line.” They believe that “God” is a subjective word and not to be defined by others – everyone should be free to “encounter the Great Mystery for himself or herself.” Some UK Unitarians use more Christian-like language to describe their belief. Others experience God as a unifying and life-giving spirit, the source of all being, the universal process that comes to consciousness as love. Some use the word “God” to signify the human ideal, and to experience God as an inward presence. Some avoid using the word “God.” Sound familiar?

I asked Rev. Helen Mills, the Walmsley minister, about herself, and about the beliefs and practices in our partner church. Helen Mills is a graduate in psychology and religious studies. She spent time in the Royal Air Force and worked with charitable organizations.

About her beliefs, and about the spiritual practices at Walmsley, she writes:

If you ask what Unitarianism is, you get many different answers from different people, that is the beauty of it I think, the religious freedom. For me, it's about my belief that we are on this Earth to learn greater wisdom and compassion for ourselves and for each other and that the spiritual teachings can help us in this way. A practical spirituality may help us to manage the situations we face in our lives,,,

I asked about the Walmsley congregation, about their worship services and rituals, and about the activities of the Chapel. She said:

Like you we have very few lifelong Unitarians and many have come from other churches such as Church of England, Methodist, Catholic, etc, ,, I value highly the teachings of Jesus, whilst much of my study and interest has been that at the depth of all the world religions lies the same message (and it has only become changed and sometimes distorted by human beings). I guess people describe me as more spiritually oriented and I do feel that the path of the spirit lies beyond the many external forms of religion and that in our Unitarian churches we have a good chance of speaking to more people in today's world. ... the people of Walmsley are very open minded to relating to what people are looking for now, as an example, with the change in the law here in relation to same-sex marriage ... Walmsley as a majority have embraced this and we are licensed for same-sex marriage ceremonies at our chapel.

The activities of their small chapel are extensive – like ours. The Walmsley Chapel is used for many community events. They host yoga classes, fitness (such as Zumba), dance, and community choral performances. They have formed a meditation group that meets once a week. They even an iPad group that meets. Walmsley hosts a Christmas Fair that sounds wonderful, with the exchange of crafts, foods, games, and so on. During the season of Advent they have a “carols by candlelight” service with brass band and seasonal readings, attended by many who don’t usually attend Sunday services.

Many of us have found a spiritual home in our Unitarian Universalist experience. Sharing with a wider group, reaching out across our boundaries, can only deepen our experience and bring the joy of fellowship.