

Anarchism and Unitarian Universalism

Clayton Dewey

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I vividly remember my first real encounter with anarchist thought; it was at a Young Religious Unitarian Universalist (YRUU) conference. I saw a girl Sonja, wearing a shirt with some sort of anarchist phrase and drawing on it. I found it odd that someone would wear an anarchy shirt, especially since she seemed so intelligent and figured that the appeal of chaos really only lied in the young angst-ridden punks I came across on occasion. Later I overheard Sonja tell of how she bought the shirt at her favorite anarchist bookstore. This told me that 1) there was actually entire books on the ideas of anarchy and that 2) if she bought it from her “favorite” store there must be other anarchist bookstores. I decided to research it. I typed in anarchy and came across the Anarchist FAQ. Soon I realized that anarchists did not in fact believe in chaos, and actually felt that order could be maintained in ways other than the state and hierarchy. Thus my journey into anarchism began.

Today I am a self-declared anarchist and Unitarian Universalist. While I can attribute my introduction into anarchism to YRUU and many of my UU friends are also anarchists, the fact remains that on both sides ignorance about the other is rampant. It’s a shame that this is true, especially because I feel that the anarchist movement and Unitarian Universalist religion could greatly compliment one other in their commitment to a better world.

Anarchism and Organized Religion

While not all anarchists absolutely reject religion, many do and many (anarchists and non-anarchists) equate anarchism with atheism. Even more reject organized religion. There’s great reason for these beliefs. The idea that one must acquiesce to the power of a “divine” or supernatural force flies in the face of the anarchist values of freedom, individuality along with their rejection of hierarchy and authority. Similarly, creed-based religions’ assertion that their way is right, even if that way is non-hierarchical, is incompatible with the anarchist notion that absolute Truth is a farce and to have one set of morals placed upon all to be coercive and destructive to creativity and individuality. Most organized religions are oppressive institutions that anarchists seek to abolish along with the state and capital. However, to throw out organized religion all together would be a grave mistake.

Many anarchists may all-out reject the idea of an organized religion, for the above-said reasons, but since when have anarchists been opposed to organization? The popular IWW cry is “Don’t mourn, organize!” And it was the Italian anarchist, Ericco Malatesta who declared that “Anarchism is organization, organization and more organization.” Just as anarchists wish to create non-hierarchical institutions which satisfy our material needs in place of the existing oppressive ones, we should be establishing institutions which satisfy our spiritual needs. This is not a call to form an anarchist church which all anarchists must subscribe to. This is, however, a call to explore the possibility of anarchistic organized religions. Fewer and fewer people are attending church regularly. The right would attribute it to the ever-increasing moral decay of our society, but perhaps it is because more people have a hard time subscribing to one, narrow interpretation of the Bible or expression of spirituality. More and more marriages are crossing religious lines, leaving parents in a bind when wishing to raise their children in a supportive community, but also one that would be open to more than one belief system. Just as “a human being in isolation cannot even live the life of a beast, for they would be unable to obtain nourishment for themselves” materially, so may they wish for spiritual nourishment from others as well. While people

are becoming disillusioned with organized religion, the healthy, self-liberating alternatives are small and virtually unknown to the populace. Again drawing from Malatesta, “When a community has needs and its members do not know how to organize spontaneously to provide them, someone comes forward, an authority who satisfies those needs by utilizing the services of all and directing them to their liking.” In this case, that authority is the religious right. When we as anarchists abandon religion and in particular organized ones, we allow the right to move in and provide for that community instead. If we cannot offer a community to help assist parents in raising a family and serve as a support group, they may simply pick the lesser of evils. It is for this reason that we must support those organized religions which are based upon the same principles that we are striving for in an anarchist society. It is my feeling that Unitarian Universalism, is one of those religions.

Self-Liberation and Religion

A significant part of anarchism is the idea of self-liberation. We must unlearn oppressive axioms instilled in us. We are socially conditioned through myriad avenues: family, school, media, etc; one which has a dramatic impact on people’s conditioning is religion. Many point to the Judaeo-Christian foundation of American society to be the root of oppressive thought such as patriarchy, white-supremacy, colonialism, etc. If we are serious about people liberating themselves mentally, emotionally and spiritually it makes sense that we be offering places for people to go that seek a religion which promotes the individual and free search for truth and meaning. The religion I wish to address in this essay is Unitarian Universalism.

Unitarian Universalism: What the Heck Does It Mean?!

Despite the long, multi-syllabic name and relatively small “membership” base (about 218,404 in the United States), Unitarian Universalism (UUism) is far from a cult. In fact, it could quite possibly be the anti-thesis of such. UUism is unique from other religions in that it is non-creedal. Thus, there is not one singular belief that binds Unitarian Universalists together. Instead, much like anarchy, UUs are brought together by a set of principles, interpreted and expressed uniquely by each individual. The principles of UUism are the following:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The Connection

As can be seen, while all the principles may not necessarily speak powerfully to all anarchists or be relevant enough to “convert” one to UUism, it can be said that each one of them is compatible with anarchism. None of the principles espouse the need for hierarchy, the domination of others, nor the presumption that life be based on competition. In fact, upon reading them, it can be drawn that the essence of anarchism (as taken from the Anarchist FAQ), “free co-operation between equals to maximise their liberty and individuality” is strongly imbedded in these principles, particularly the first, second, fourth, fifth and sixth.

L. Susan Brown describes anarchism as the belief in “the inherent dignity and worth of the human individual,” almost identical to the first principle of UUism. Hence, the basic premise of UUism springs from a reverence for the freedom of the individual. Hierarchy and domination is directly opposed to this, as well as against the fourth principle “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” It is up to the individual, not some higher authority (be that person, word or deity) to decide what is right and true. It can be said then, that UUism and anarchism both spring from the principle of liberty.

Both UUs and anarchists realize that liberty does not exist in a vacuum, thus the word “responsible” being present in the fourth principle. Along with that, they understand that humans are social beings and interaction is inevitable. What must be asked then, is how should we interact so as the most freedom can be attained? UUs point to the values of “justice, equity and compassion” as those which should be present in our relations with one another. Anarchists would agree, claiming that voluntary cooperation (mutual aid) is the principle on which we should base our interactions. Further, UUs call for the “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Once again, the respect for liberty as well as the rejection of domination over another. It could also be said that it acknowledges the need for solidarity, for we are all connected.

The last principle of anarchism, equity, is also among the values of UUs. When we speak of equity, we mean not the subjugation of people to fit a certain model, but rather ensuring that opportunities are open equally to all. UUs have demonstrated this in thought, calling for “equity” in human relations and a world based on “justice.”

UU History — The Fight For Religious Freedom

UUism was born from two faiths, Unitarianism and Universalism, eventually uniting in the sixties. Both these religions came out of the fight that anarchists have taken on now — rejection of authority and hierarchy.

Unitarian comes from the word “one god.” Unitarians rejected the Trinity (Father, Son and Holy Ghost) and the deification of a human being, in this case Jesus, as serving them in any way. Rather than worship Jesus, they followed him. Like the Unitarians, Leo Tolstoy, probably the most influential character in the Christian Anarchist movement, drew his inspiration from Jesus’ actions and words rather than obsessing over whether or not he was divine and the one Son of God. In biblical texts he saw “the voluntary poverty of Jesus, his comments on the corrupting effects of wealth and the Biblical claim that the world was created for humanity to be enjoyed in common have all been taken as the basis of a socialistic critique of private property and capi-

talism.” The idea that Jesus was a person rather than a deity also rejected the notion that no one can be as great as Jesus, but that indeed all can live out the examples he set forth.

While the Unitarians rejected absolute authority, the Universalists took on hierarchy. Universalism comes from the idea of universal salvation. At the time, pre-destination: the idea that people’s souls are stamped as good or evil the moment they are conceived on thus only certain people will reach heaven, was commonly held. Predestination was an effective tool in justifying the positions of the ruling class and their nobility, for they were good and deserved their unequal amount of power while the poor were kept down. Universalists cried out against this, claiming that God was a loving and compassionate God and that anyone and in fact all people were capable of reaching heaven. And from this position came the first principle – The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Along with the courage to put forth these beliefs in freedom and equality; UUs have consistently been at the forefront in regards to accepting marginalized and persecuted people. “The Gloucester church included a freed slave among its charter members, and the Universalists became the first denomination to ordain women to the ministry, beginning in 1863 with Olympia Brown.” UUism has also been a leader regarding glbtq rights, establishing a Gay Affairs Office in 1973. Openly gay men and women can and are ministers within the faith. UU Ministers also ordain same-sex marriages. UUism is rich in dissent as well as the continued fight against oppression towards a more accepting, free world.

Unitarian Universalism has also popularized many ideas that anarchism embraces as well. The best example of this is probably Henry David Thoreau, Unitarian and transcendentalist. Thoreau’s essay, *Civil Disobedience* is without a doubt one of the most influential writings in the history of radicalism. His statement that “How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it.. Under a government which imprisons any unjustly, the true place for a just man is also a prison” galvanized people into going against the government and refusing to comply with the rules. It is from this idea that one of most highly regarded tactics by anarchists, direct action, emerged. Another influential radical Unitarian is singer/songwriter and labor activist Pete Seeger. In the same category is Utah Phillips, outspoken proponent for anarchism and UUism. The Unitarian Universalist movement also has strong ties with women’s rights movements and feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft herself was both an anarchist and Unitarian and was bold in her radical politics and challenges of the church. Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Louisa May Alcott, to name just a few, were all Unitarian women who fought for the rights and respect of women. Historically, many UUs have been an active force in radical politics, living out the seven principles and the essence of Unitarian and Universalist belief.

UUism’s Liberal Reformist Downfalls

There’s no doubt that Unitarian Universalists have been some of the more daring religious peoples of our time, since Michael Servetus (one of the first to preach the Unitarian faith) was burned at the stake, UUs have confronted ridicule and suppression for their belief that each person should have the right to choose his/her religious beliefs.

And while there have been many a brave Unitarian and Universalist, the religion and its past is far from perfect. Yes, the religion has offered sanctuary for the persecuted, but not consistently.

It was in the sixties that Unitarian Universalism lost a great deal of its supporters, people of color. It was because a great deal of UUs were uncomfortable with being “too vocal” about civil rights. As a result, people of color left the faith betrayed. To this day, the majority of UUs are white, are middle to upperclass and liberal reformists. There have been steps made to mend the wrongs of the past, but most UUs’ involvement in the political arena is flawed in the same way liberals’ involvement is — issue-oriented rather than holistic, minimalistic and ineffective (ie: voting, typical boring protests) and paternalistic.

Another flaw I see with the faith is what many people are calling “the gap.” That is, once young UUs leave the house they also leave the church. According to the UU World, as many as 90 percent of UUs leave the church after graduating high school. The biggest reason for this is a simple one — the UUA doesn’t provide for what young adults are looking for. Most don’t care for the traditional, sit-down and listen to someone speak, format but are also ageing out of Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (YRUU). They need something unique for them as well as an understanding of what they are going through. Unfortunately, many UUs are out of touch with young adults as well as their passions. Thus a mass exodus of young adults from the faith is the current reality.

But There’s Hope!

Luckily, steps are being made to rectify these failures by the church. Many anti-oppression programs have been starting up, challenging many UUs’ privileges as white, upper-class individuals. The Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM) formed in 1997 to “create a support and advocacy organization for People of Color working in professional capacities within Unitarian Universalism.” (www.druumm.org/2.html). Since its inception, the organization has expanded to include all members of the UUA, not just professionals. The new president, Bill Sinkford, was popularly elected because of his determination to put issues such as race, multiculturalism and anti-oppression work to the forefront as issues for the UUA to focus on. Also, more and more congregations are becoming “welcoming congregations,” meaning that they have completed programs that bring awareness to the unique situation that the glbtq community is faced with and what sort of role UUs can take in ending the oppression and hardship felt by them.

Just as UUs are working towards being better anti-racist allies with people of color and other oppressed groups, they are also working towards meeting the needs of young adults. The Mind the Gap campaign was started up to address the age gap between youth and adults. The campaign successfully raised 2 million dollars to offer services specific to the needs of young adults.

UUs have certainly made mistakes before and continue to do so now, but our strong focus on being consistent in our values as well as a strong tendency towards critical thinking has kept the religion fresh and ever-evolving. The above-mentioned steps being made towards becoming a truly free and equal religion, despite the strong reformist and privileged nature of many UUs, is proof that working with this religion is worthy of our time and effort. If we as anarchists are more vocal within the movement, these sort of changes will be stronger and quicker. In fact, many of the UUs involved in putting on anti-oppression workshops, fundraising for campus ministries, etc. are anarchists. As anarchists, our understanding of privilege, power and oppression are invaluable to those seeking to take on such projects. Also, the anarchist movement is comprised

mostly of young adults, precisely the populace the UUA is seeking to reach out to. If we become active in the religion, those issues which Unitarian Universalists are working on will be deepened by our own experiences and knowledge. It has always been when UUs have had a healthy understanding of power and privilege along with the ability to create non-hierarchical organizations, that they have provided spaces for people to exercise their faith freely and to the fullest. If a strong anti-authoritarian strain consistently runs through the faith, programs such as Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (YRUU) will continue to empower youth, Unitarian Universalist Young Adult Network (UUYAN) will grow, more congregations will prioritize anti-oppression work, the organizational structure of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) will become more horizontal and less hierarchical and other facets of the faith will be truly democratic, accepting and libertarian in nature.

What's In It For Us

Of course, this offer of the hand, like any, would not be one-sided but mutually-beneficial. I've known many an anarchist to get burned out, grow jaded and bitter. A perfect example is a recent discussion regarding the A-Zone, a long running infoshop in Chicago. When putting out a call for help, many people responded with ambivalence because of the elitist, pretentious attitude they come up against when offering to help in the past. This isn't the case everywhere, but it certainly exists enough to be taken serious note of. In many ways it has been my spirituality, cultivated within Unitarian Universalism that has kept me grounded, energized, positive and hopeful. I'm not saying that UUism will magically erase the police harassment, the horrific injustice anarchists face when fighting against capitalism or even the toll that just knowing the destructive effects of capitalism takes upon us, but I do feel that for many anarchists: UU circles have the potential to offer support, understanding and an intimacy with people that is always vital when working for positive change.

There are, in fact, UU circles that have taken on an explicitly radical tone: UUignite — for UU radicals engage politically and UU Prophets, “an effort to reclaim radical Unitarian, Universalist and Unitarian Universalist history and kindle the UU legacy of social justice.”

Along with curbing rampant cynicism or hopelessness, the UU church's services are ones that many anarchist parents could benefit from. As was mentioned at the beginning of this piece, many parents would like a supportive community to raise their children. UU religious education is extremely positive for children, offering the diverse views of world religions, encouraging an understanding of the many spiritual views out there. Rather than telling kids what to do, they simply show them what is out there and then let them decide for themselves what fits them best. YRUU basically saved me in high school because it was the only place where I could be accepted for who I really was. It was also there that I learned many of the activist skills I possess now: making decisions based on consensus, putting on conferences and holding successful workshops.

UU congregations oftentimes offer services beyond Sunday such as book clubs, women's and men's groups, pagan clusters, daycare services, etc. Church doors are often opened to protesters during summits or conferences as well as concerts, benefit shows, and other events. If we have a healthy relationship with the local church these resources are available to us: Food Not Bombs could use their kitchen, the sanctuary could be opened up for an Anarchist Black Cross benefit

show or people traveling could just spend the night inside away from the cold. These bonds have already been made in some areas and in others they can be developed and strengthened.

The Unitarian Universalist church is one that shares the most basic principles as we anarchists do: freedom, solidarity and mutual aid. It's about time we begin to actualize these principles by reaching out to one another. Here are some ideas to facilitate such networks:

1. Hold a workshop on anarchism at a youth or young adult conference, esp. social justice conferences.
2. Give a service or presentation on anarchism (or Emma Goldman, abolition movement, etc.) to a congregation.
3. Start an anarchy book club and invite UUs to attend
4. Combine efforts on campaigns that both UUs and anarchists are interested in: food not bombs, same-sex marriage, fighting against religious bigots, pro-choice rights, etc.
5. If you stay at a UU church or use their building for an event be respectful and try to engage in honest, sincere discussion with UU members about your beliefs so as to dispel any myths they may be holding about you.
6. Attend a service or program put on by UUs that interest you: debate about the existence of god, anti-oppression training, etc.
7. Approach UU booths if you come across them at events and talk to them about anarchism and the commonalities you share.

Related Links

www.uuignite.net

www.uuyan.org

www.uua.org

Sources

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