

By Whose Authority?

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Authority ...It's complicated, it's challenging, sometimes authority is feared and avoided, Authority is questioned and critiqued. Some of us have seen authority denied to us and others resist the weight authority affords us. We seek authority in our relationships with children and relinquish it in our relationships with partners. Authority is sought after, debated, obfuscated, negated and measured.

Authority it's complicated for Unitarian Universalists. From Michael Servetus to Jack Mendelson, we have historically challenged authority with intellect, reason, curiosity, facts, science and righteous indignation. Much of how we learn our UU history, has been through the stories of individuals and events that celebrate our oppositional relationship with some form of authority, be it the authority of Calvin's church in Geneva, or the authority of George Wallace's state in Alabama. Remember, we Unitarians and Universalists took aim at the doctrines of Hell and Trinitarianism. We threw off the Nicene and Chalcedonian encumbrances and were free to see new obstacles that stood in the way. We challenged the centrality of Christology and the manifestations of the human Christ. We debated the authority of theism, yielded to mystical Transcendentalism, embraced Religious and secular Humanism and we continue reconfigure and create new constructs to provide us with meaning and purpose. We Unitarians and Universalists become prickly when it comes to the idea that someone or something has a right to exercise power over us in any form. If we were a congregation of two year olds our Sunday affirmation might be "*you are not the boss of me*" Those of us who are parents know that by the age of two or three, children have learned two of the most important words in the English language: "No" and "why?" Even at this young age, these future, citizens are learning how to think critically and take the initiative to stand up for what they believe in. While toddlers are usually given the

typical answers—“Because I said so”———,as they age, they learn to question authority, if they are to have agency for themselves and the world around them.

I still remember my theological *you are not the boss of me moment*. It was after leaving my first UU service at Arlington St. Church in Boston during college. Having been raised as a Jehovah's Witness where beliefs were imposed on me from above in a hierarchy that always found something wrong with my behavior, I was so grateful to be able to breathe deeply here at a UU church. My conviction of unconditional love for humanity was in synch with this new community of faith, filled with compassionate individuals, seeking to live life responsibly, guided by principles, that facilitated the potentiality of human experience. It was the narrative of freedom and resistance that attracted me to this faith some 35 years ago. I grew up as an adult in this faith studying our history, marching for our causes, facilitating task forces, teaching religious education and preaching against the authority of limited narrow mindedness.

Yet, as we mature, the passions and heroes of our young adult life start to be seen in less vibrant colors. Our chants become faint and harder to hear. Our anti authoritarian stands are recessing in our memories. After all, postmodernism laid to rest the authority of the meta narratives that we fought so hard against. The academy has dismissed the authority of the Enlightenment modernists. Our binary interrogation of authority has yielded to the assertion of critical theory. Our rebellion against our religious pasts seem to shrink in magnitude as we tell the same stories ad nauseum. Yes, we all had the button, the t - short and the bumper sticker, that said question authority. But what bumper sticker do you put on your car after you have questioned authority? What questions about authority should we be posing to our youthful 50 year old Unitarian Universalist movement of 250 thousand souls?

The Rev. Dr. Victoria Weinstein says that “We have thus far in our post-merger existence as Unitarian Universalists treated our theological legacy with white gloves: as fragile, faded archival material to be handled as lightly as possible and then filed respectfully away in an attic or basement file cabinet, or as historical curiosities to be peered at curiously over the top of our spectacles, smiled fondly over, and left in the

church library to be studied by the few UUs who ask for a key to the locked stacks.”

(end quote)

What can we learn about our tradition through the lens of critical theory? I wonder, have we really challenged authority as the farthest left edge of the Protestant Reformation, or have we been satiated by the comfort of a new authority of insularity? What can be repurposed from those dusty stacks of resistance to unlock and energize our movement?

STORY: I remember an unchurched friend of mine retelling their story to me of visiting a UU church after hearing from me and others that this would be a church like no other, an experience that would be transformative, a day that they will remember forever. After returning from the church he said that it would be hard for him to join a community that appeared to have such a authoritarian Protestant presentation. I was stunned and very defensive. But upon closer inspection I realized that we do have an environmental presentation problem. Old wood and pews facing forward. Our form of governance derives from the Puritans and has not changed significantly for over 350 years. Our ways of training and calling ministers are Protestant. Our liturgical tradition is unmistakably Protestant, our associational structure, denominational staff structure and understanding of authority and responsibility have so much more in common with Protestant traditions than with any other religious tradition.

Friends, our challenge today, is not the explicit authority of religious dogma, but the implicit authority of cultural hegemony that is apparent in how our churches are perceived and presented.

Now, In simple terms, hegemony refers to the way in which the powerful shape a society's norms, values, and other institutions, and how that particular shaping becomes accepted as default, natural, perpetual, and inevitable. That is, people tend to regard the way we currently run things in society as the only way to run things in society. Instead of regarding our background systems as just one set of institutions among thousands of possibilities, people appear to think of them as default constants.

One consequence of cultural hegemony is that when people think about changing things, they only think about how they can make change within the parameters of the existing structures. Since the authority of Unitarian Universalist hegemonic culture experiences itself as universal, rarely do members participating in the culture think about making changes within the confines of those established systems. The authority of this hegemony is apparent in the descriptive language we use or don't use.. HERE IS AN EXAMPLE of this hegemonic authority : I can't not count the numbers of times that UU's have come up to me to tell me about a Black person they know, or about a book they read by a black author. So for fun I start to say that I read this by such and such white person or heard so so and white lectured. Usually a puzzled look comes over them as to why I am saying white.

Since white people don't have an ethnicity, the way that heterosexuals don't have a sexual orientation, and men don't have a gender. At church, this can mean that Western European culture is simply "music" or "literature" or "hymns." And not "European music" or "Anglo hymns." But on some special Sundays, we'll have *Latino* music or *African-American* hymns or *South Asian* literature.

STORY: Back in the 90's When I started a Black UU church most of my colleagues and many in our Association were polite, but taken aback. They asked *why not just integrate into our churches to make them multicultural?* I responded that this was not possible because white Anglo hegemony, cultural appropriation, reductionist, and simplistic treatments of my cultural authority muffles my identity.

I said then and I will say it now, most of the Unitarian Universalist congregations I have visited, served and known are overwhelmingly white and Anglo, so I would like to propose to the UUA that we stop trying to do make churches diverse and accept these churches as an "ethnic churches"? There is nothing wrong or shameful about Anglo Saxon or Western European culture. Yet, Unitarian Universalists ask, "How can we

become more multicultural? How can we attract more members of different cultural communities to our congregations?" These are good questions. Let's also ask, "What do members of different cultural communities lose when they join a Unitarian Universalist congregation?" At times I have felt at home among the Unitarian Universalists and at times I have felt exiled among the Unitarian Universalists. Following the dictates of my conscience and the leadings of the Spirit has simultaneously meant finding a community of faith and losing an important access point to the culture of my ancestors. I found a place that speaks my religious language but that only speaks it with European authority.

Now hear me when I say, I've loved every Unitarian Universalist church I've been in—even the ones that were hard to love. UUs are my people. And at the same time, UUs are not my people. My people are also ones who dance to a Kirk Franklin song in church, talk back to the minister, put messages in bottle trees in front of their houses for the ancestors, they jump the broom when they get married, they have Watch Night at church on New year's Eve while eating hoppin john greens and fish. Instead of having me and other people of color lose ourselves in translation of ethnic churches that do not reflect anything of our culture, why not start ethnic UU churches to break the cycle of hegemonic authority that keeps us isolated, small, insular and stuck? Why not start ethnic churches so people of color and others do not have to make such significant losses that can include being cut off from a major source of ethnic pride, connection and identity.

STORY The formerly Swedish Covenant Church, now covenant church has double in size in the past 15 years because it confronted their hegemony with clarity of vision that a growing denomination had to meet people within their cultural context instead of asking them to abandon it. thus they have started many ethnic Covenant churches throughout the US with much success. What would our movement look like if we started more ethnic churches?

I Am convinced that our message, our principles and purposes can be repurposed in ethnic UU churches that have their our authority to serve as safe havens. After the Civil

War ended in 1865, emancipated African Americans left their former white masters' churches to form black congregations. The rich history of the American black church is one not only of worship, but as the hub of the African American community. Ethnic UU churches allow for specific cultural perspectives to develop and be heard. Imagine the new UU theological voices that would be nurtured from people of color who develop in a specific and robust cultural context? Ethnic UU churches could provide a connection to customs, language, ritual and power structures that we wish to retain. Imagine the affirmation and power of translating UU principles into the cultural context of specific groups of color. Ethnic UU churches could help resist the marginalization and tokenism. Assimilation hurts us all. Ethnic churches could give rise to a unique expressions of Unitarian Universalism. However, ethnic UU churches are not excluders, but incubators that allow potentially fragile populations to establish themselves, grow, develop a unique witness. Remember friends that historically monocultural churches like German Lutherans, English Baptists, Scottish Presbyterian, British Anglican, and others established themselves in colonial America. These monocultural churches became incubators for those who came to these shores seeking freedom, which included the freedom to add their past cultural values from Germany, Scotland, and England to a new American future. I just read about one of the two Lutheran churches in this country that still speak Norwegian Lutheran Memorial Church of Minneapolis. Can you imagine GA? Can you imagine the bababer parade? Let us be so bold to create a new polycentric authority with multiple centers, multiple ethnic churches and multiple modes of worship for Unitarian Universalism to grow and flourish in the coming generations. Just imagine where we might go and who we might become as a movement.