

A LIGHT INSIDE OF YOU

Michael Tino

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Northern Westchester – December 2, 2007

© 2007 MICHAEL JAMES TINO

It is written in the Christian Scripture of Matthew, in Chapter 5 that Jesus once preached to those gathered around him the following: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel [basket], but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works.... (Matthew 5:14-16)

But this teaching, that in us there is a light that needs to be let out to others, stands in stark contrast with the conservative theologies that permeate our culture. Again and again we hear that there is something bad inherent in humanity, that “worldly” things are evil, and that expressions of human capacities for reason and tolerance are going against the will of a wrathful God.

Where is the light in this view of the world?

Inherent in much of conservative Christian theology is that humans are, by their very nature, sinful beings, a view shared by other belief systems as well. Many forms of Christianity contain within them a doctrine of original sin—the sin all human beings have inherited from Adam and Eve at the dawn of creation.

And while most of my illustrations of this viewpoint come from this Christian teaching, it is not the only theology in which the human world is somehow less than good. Muslim teachings, for example, take the same story in the Garden of Eden and tell us that Allah forgave the original sin of Adam and Eve. Because of this “original forgiveness,” if you will, all humans are in a state of submission to Allah, and our actions that distract us from this submission—or *islam*—are the heart of our sinful nature. (<http://www.religionfacts.com/islam/beliefs/human.htm>)

The early Christian theologian Augustine, in his *Confessions*, states that humans are prone to “lewd customs” that turn us away from God—lewd customs such as loving things other than God, be they the enjoyment of material goods or our love for another person. Augustine’s view of human nature is not a very positive or empowering view. In this view, without the active grace of God, humans sin because of their connections with other things and beings, connections that we cannot help but have.

Where is the light in this Confession?

This view of the world survives to this day in Roman Catholic teachings. Just last Friday, Pope Benedict issued a document entitled “Saved By Hope” in which he claimed that all hope for a better future for our world comes solely from God. As reported in yesterday’s *New York Times*:

“‘To protest against God in the name of justice is not helpful,’ the 80-year-old pope wrote in the encyclical, the highest papal teaching. ‘A world without God is a world without hope. Only God can create justice. And faith

gives us the certainty that he does so.” (“In Pope’s Latest Teaching, An Argument for Hope, Not Atheism, in the Face of Struggle,” by Ian Fisher, *New York Times* 12-1-07, on-line at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/01/world/europe/01pope.html>)

So, then, according to the Pope, humans cannot even create justice by ourselves. We are that powerless, that hopeless. Where is the light in this encyclical?

Conservative Protestant theology doesn’t do us any better. It is a foundational part of the theologies of both Luther and Calvin that humanity is by its nature depraved.

Martin Luther’s theology holds that the grace of God alone is decisive in the salvation of humanity, that a benevolent God graces a sinful humanity with salvation even though we don’t deserve it, as long as we believe the right things.

Calvin’s teaching was even more pessimistic. John Snyder writes that, “Calvinists believe in ‘total depravity.’ In other words, sin has devastated man so severely that no human faculty escaped the corruption of sin. Sin has damaged every part of us, our minds, our spirits, our capacity to love, our reasoning. Everything. Man is a total mess. Of every brand and denomination of Christianity... the Calvinist had the absolutely lowest opinion of human nature.” (John Snyder, “Calvinism and the Success of Liberal Democracy - The Calvinist Conception of Man,” on-line at http://www.apologetics.com/default.jsp?bodycontent=/articles/cultural_apologetics/snyder-democracy2.html)

Where is the light in this mess? In this powerlessness?

Liberal Christian theology provided a strong reaction to this view of the world. Liberal theologians asserted that the human faculty of reason is a worthwhile and powerful aspect of human nature. In doing so, they understood that there was, indeed, some good to be found in humanity, some light to be found within each of us.

And this liberal theology is the ground out of which Unitarianism was born in Europe and the United States.

Sixteenth century Unitarian Michael Servetus, who was put to death by John Calvin for his heretical theology, was also a physician who discovered how blood circulates through the heart and lungs and is oxygenated and returned to the body.

In typical fashion of the scientists of his day, Servetus was eager to connect his medical discovery to his theological understanding—a Unitarian theology developed by applying reason to his reading of Scripture.

Servetus decided that with every breath, humans inhaled the spirit of God that it all around us. The whole of divine spirit is literally *inspired* into the lungs through the mouth and nostrils. This closely follows the Hebrew Scriptures, in which the words for spirit and breath are the same—God having breathed life into the nostrils of Adam. The spirit is then dispersed throughout the body by the blood.

Looking back from a 21st century perspective, we know that it’s oxygen that’s inspired into the lungs. But the thought that the very substance on which all life depends—a substance to be found in every cell of every being

on the planet—is one and the same as the spirit of God gives us a less cynical view of the world around us than the natural/supernatural dualism espoused by conservative Christians.

The Unitarians whose theology was developed in the United States some two hundred and fifty years after Servetus took their opposition to the Calvinist view of human depravity even further.

In looking at the liberal view of human nature, Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams writes:

“In religious liberalism, the rationalistic view of human nature and of the human situation appeared as a revolt against the Protestant dogma of the total depravity of human nature, that is, against a depraved, lopsided, rationalized form of the Christian doctrine of original sin. In short, it was a revolt against a voluntarism that had gone to seed.”

He continues: “The Unitarians and their predecessors were among those who were in the vanguard of this revolt against the pessimistic Reformation conception. In opposition to the Calvinist view...the Unitarians asserted that man’s possession of the faculty of reason gives him the dignity of a child of God; and they held that by means of this faculty man could eliminate the superstitions and unworthy accretions of the Christian tradition....” (James Luther Adams, in “The Changing Reputation of Human Nature,” from *Voluntary Associations*, ed. J. Ronald Engel, pp. 14-61)

Finally, the light was back, and the light that Unitarians saw was in the mind—the light of reason.

There is, however, such a thing as too much of a good thing.

An over-reliance on reason meant that Unitarians developed a faith that was deeply distrustful of the role of emotion in human experience. It meant that feelings of mystery and wonder were dismissed as valid sources of religious knowledge—thrown out like the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

And, in time, the liberal theological focus on the goodness of humanity led many to a belief system in which people were seen as inherently good—precisely the opposite viewpoint that Calvinists held to.

William Ellery Channing, an early Unitarian theologian, is often credited for convincing Unitarians of his time to embrace the notion that each of us contains a spark of the divine within; that at our core is a glowing ember of goodness to be fanned into flame, and not a Calvinistic pit of depravity.

While a theology of inherent goodness certainly creates a less self-destructive, depressing, hateful religion, it also misses the fact that human beings have a capacity for evil within us.

19th century Unitarian minister James Freeman Clarke in 1885 famously summed up the five things that Unitarians of his time held as beliefs, the last of which was “the progress of mankind onward and upward forever.” Clarke explained it thusly: “The one fact which is written on nature and human life, which accords with all we see and know, is the fact of progress; and this must be accepted as the purpose of creation.” (Clarke, as quoted in Adams, *Ibid.*)

Clarke’s assertion was in keeping with the liberal theology and philosophy of his time, which saw human history as an uninterrupted march towards the good.

James Luther Adams examines this liberal religious philosophy and calls it naïve at best. He writes “history is a theatre of conflicts in which the tensions between the will to mutuality and the will to power appear in their most subtle and perverse forms. In short, history is tragic.” (ibid.)

While I believe that Adams sells progress a little short, he rightly calls us to understand that the progress of humanity is non-linear at best. Great evil can and does happen, and on a regular basis.

So today, as we assert that each of us has a light within us, let us not ignore the darkness that lives there as well.

It is as overly simplistic to ascribe to humanity (or God or the universe) inherent good as it is to ascribe to it inherent evil. I believe it is even too simplistic to decide simply that we have a “purpose” towards the good, as liberal theologian William Wallace Fenn, along with process theologians who speak of God as a “lure” towards that which is good, have claimed. (Fenn, William Wallace. “Modern Liberalism,” *American Journal of Theology*, Volume XVII, pp. 509-519 (October, 1913, p.518)

Instead, I believe we need to explain evil as an integral part of life and nature, and not as some outside thing that we seek to escape. While this is unsatisfying if one wants or needs to believe that evil will one day cease to exist, I think we would do better to understand what makes us want or need to believe such a thing in the first place.

For just as oxygen inhaled in air provides an essential component of life and is necessary for the creative powers of life, it also provides an essential component for the destructive power of fire. A similar tension exists within each of us—the tension between creative and destructive powers.

Again, we turn to James Luther Adams, who wrote (in an era when the sexist language of “man” to mean all of humanity was much more accepted than today):

“...what should be noticed here is that this contradiction in human nature derives from the fact that man’s will is a decisive element in his structure. And it is a will that is ambiguous in character. Power as such is necessary for existence; indeed, it is necessary also for the achievement of mutuality.” (ibid.)

He continued by noting that a person with freedom to choose his or her own actions can, and I quote, “use his freedom by expressing a will to mutuality, but he can also abuse it by exercising a will to power. Freedom is therefore,” according to Adams, “both the basis of meaning and the occasion for the destruction of meaning.”

When we ignore the capability of human beings to engage in evil acts by focusing on our inherent worth and goodness, we fool ourselves.

Giving due respect to James Luther Adams requires us to look at the tendencies of people towards greed and power, the choices that so many humans have made to create harm for others on the Earth, the choices of violence and warfare, of ecological destruction in the name of profit, of espousing viewpoints based on hatred for an entire group of people.

“It cannot be denied,” Adams writes, “that religious liberalism has neglected these aspects of human nature in its zeal to proclaim the spark of divinity in man. We may call these tendencies by any name we wish, but we do not escape their destructive influence by a conspiracy of silence concerning them. Certainly,” he writes, “the

practice of shunning the word 'sin' because 'it makes one feel gloomy and pious' has little more justification than the use of the ostrich method in other areas of life." (Ibid.)

So, today, without putting our heads in the sand, I contend that we still face the challenge of letting the light within us shine.

Just as darkness can be overcome with more light, so can any tendency towards the bad be overcome by increasing the good.

And as we enter into this season in which the light of nature is at its most limited, we are called by many faith traditions to fill our lives with light. The menorah, the Christmas tree, Kwanzaa candles and Yule logs are familiar to many of us as calls to bring light into our world at this time of year.

They join candles nestled in leaf boats floating down the rivers of Thailand in November, wreaths of candles for St. Lucia each December 13 throughout Scandinavia, candles on the beaches of Brazil on New Year's eve, and mid-January bonfires for the holiday of *Sadeh* in Iran.

But today, I'm more interested in the metaphorical light than the actual one.

What do we each need to do to let the light within us shine?

How can you show that which is good within you to others this holiday season?

Only you can answer that question.

Perhaps you are already doing so—perhaps you are among the people who have donated toys to the children of inmates in Bedford Hills (Paul tells me we have more than seventy gifts as of Thursday).

Perhaps you're one of the people who helped us collect 140 cans of cranberry sauce so that clients of the Interfaith Food Pantry won't be without it for the holidays (Jane reports we've done it—congratulations to all of you!).

Perhaps you're one of the folks who have given the children of Neighbors Link new books, or maybe you're feeding the Guest at Your Table in preparation to bring in a check on January 6th.

Maybe you're singing with the choir next Sunday, bringing joy to all who gather here, or you've signed up to help celebrate Hanukkah with the children in Religious Education.

Quite possibly, you're finding your own ways, outside of this Fellowship, to let your light shine this holiday season. To bring some goodness into the lives of others, to use your gifts and talents in service to all of creation. To make the world a little less evil, to bend the arc of history a little more towards justice.

This holiday season, let's give those liberal theologians who saw inherent goodness at the core of humanity something to be proud about. Let the light within you shine, let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.