

# MAY I OFFEND YOU?

Michael Tino

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READING, FROM *WALKING TOGETHER*, BY CONRAD WRIGHT, PP.15-17

The minister's primary relationship to the particular church is as an equal covenanted member. The special status as minister of the congregation rests on this primary relationship. (Not so in other traditions: in Presbyterianism, for example, the minister's membership is in the presbytery, not in the local church he or she serves.) ...

By emphasizing that the minister is in the first place a member of the church like all other members, the basis is laid for democratic leadership. ...

The minister in a liberal church is not there to hold the keys to the kingdom of heaven by admitting to the Lord's Table only those found worthy, as in churches that seriously accept a sacramental theology. Nor is he or she there to instruct the people in truths that the ordained clergy are peculiarly competent to expound, as in many confessional churches. He or she is there to live, and learn, and grow with the congregation. By virtue of special training and experience, the minister's word and example carry weight and earn the right to exercise leadership. That leadership may well make the difference between growth and decay for the church. But it is the possession of skill in democratic leadership, more than the adherence to a liberal ideology that is the mark of the true minister of a liberal church.

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SERMON: MAY I OFFEND YOU

Before I begin, I have to give credit to my friend and colleague the Rev. Stefan Jonasson for the title and subject of today's sermon. Last year, in the middle of my search for a congregation to serve, he and I were talking about how to start off things right, and he said that one of his first sermons would always have this title: "May I Offend You?" I asked, and received, permission to use it.

So, just what does that mean? I try to be pretty straightforward in my life and my ministry, and it means, on one level just that: I consider this fair warning that at some point, I, your minister, will offend you. Further, I feel that I need to let you know that it is my *job* to do so.

But, you might be saying, why not call this sermon "I *Will* Offend You?" The fact that I'm asking, and not telling, points to the other side of the issue I'm bringing to you today. You have to be willing to listen to what I have to say even if you disagree—no matter how much you might disagree. I don't take this part for granted, so today I'm asking for your permission—your permission to offend you, to say things you don't really want to hear, to engage in constructive disagreement with you, to challenge you, and to, from time to time, push you in ways I feel you need to be pushed.

To be honest, I really don't have to ask. In calling me as your minister last April, you gave me that permission. My Letter of Agreement contains a section which reads: "It is a basic premise of this Congregation that the pulpit is free and untrammelled. The Minister is expected to express his values, views, and commitments without fear or favor."

But it's my guess that most of you haven't read my Letter of Agreement. And the vote you took was in favor of calling me, and, though I wasn't in the meeting at the time, my guess is that nobody said "we're voting to give Michael the right and responsibility to offend us from time to time."

But the truth is that I will probably, at some point, offend you (if I have not done so already), or at least make you a little mad.

It might be when I take a stand on an issue of social justice on which reasonable people can and do disagree. I might offend you by insisting that a woman's body shouldn't be subject to governmental control, by supporting equal marriage rights for all, or by asking you to think about your power and privilege in our society and how that relates to the perpetuation of racism in America.

I might offend you by my positions on the wars our nation is fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, by my opinions on immigration, or by my suggestions on how to live environmentally-sustainable lives. Perhaps you will be taken aback by my mere insistence that we have a moral obligation as a religious community to create a more just world.

I might offend you over a matter of theology. You might bristle when I use the word "God" in worship, or you might feel empty when I don't.

You might, like Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, find my naturalistic theology to be a wishy-washy viewpoint that, if I had any guts, I would just call "atheism." Or, you might feel that my seeing the natural world as the ground of all existence dismisses your own experience of something you label a connection with the supernatural.

I've already had disagreements with half of the Worship Committee over the word "prayer," and I have no doubt those folks were representative of feelings that are more widespread. I've already had interesting discussions with several folks about the theological implications of my Sunday wardrobe: some have inquired as to whether I would wear a ministerial robe to preach in, or a stole, or just, as I am doing today, a suit and tie.

At some point, I might bring to the surface long-buried warnings against Paganism from your Christian upbringing when I invoke the Four Directions in honor of those whose theology is Earth-centered. I might make you hear in your head the voices of your Jewish parents teaching you about their experiences with anti-Semitism when I choose a reading or a hymn that includes the word "church" even though we've consciously chosen a more inclusive name for this congregation.

It is possible, even, that you and I will disagree about more mundane matters. Perhaps it will make you uneasy to know that you have a minister who doesn't mind talking about money from the pulpit, or sex, or voting, or any number of subjects that our society says should be taboo. Perhaps you don't want to understand yourself as connected to a larger movement of Unitarian Universalists, and I will remind you that you are. Perhaps I will seek to change the thing you've cherished the most about our Order of Service.

Whatever the issue, it is probable that at some point, you and I will disagree. And at that point, we'll need to remind ourselves of why it's so wonderful to be Unitarian Universalists. In our faith, the freedom of the pulpit is held to be, in the words of our agreement, a "basic premise." Today, I'd like to explore why that is and what I believe it means.

Freedom of the pulpit also has a counterpart—freedom of the pew. It's not mentioned anywhere in our Fellowship's documents, but it is implied in many different ways. I hope that you will understand it a bit better at the end of our time together today as well.

Freedom of the pulpit is at the center of our faith. It is part of the relationship between minister and congregation, and is so foundational that our Association recommends that new congregations insert a clause about it in their by-laws. It is grounded in our history—the history of a free and voluntary religious community that comes together by agreement and not by force, the history of the development of a religion without a creed or dogma to which people are forced to subscribe.

Unitarian Universalists trace our traditions of governance back to 1648, when representatives from the congregations of the Massachusetts colonies came together to write the Cambridge Platform, which described the relationships among congregations as a community of autonomous institutions. In doing so, they rejected the hierarchy that until that point was an integral part of most Western religions.

They dispensed with bishops, councils, and any form of governance that could direct the work of an individual congregation, and instead gave the members of a congregation full control over matters within it. They defined the covenant created by members of an individual congregation as the basis of our governance.

Further, the Cambridge Platform described the relationship of minister and congregation. There are two specific parts of this relationship I think are important to know about.

First, the Cambridge Platform basically says that in electing me as your minister, you agree to listen to what I have to say. It doesn't obligate you to agree with me (we'll get to that in a little bit), but it does say that your vote should not have been cast lightly, as I'm the person whose job it is to filter the world around us through theological lenses and make some sense of it on Sunday mornings.

Your votes to call and ordain me define a relationship. The Reverend Daniel O'Connell describes it this way:

"The preacher is free to preach as they are called to preach, based on the fact that they are living a very different kind of life than most of their parishioners.... They have time for study—for engagement with the world—that some of their parishioners don't, and they are brought to speak the truth to that particular body of people as best as they can. They are not instructed by bishops, they are not instructed by a lectionary, they are instructed by their colleagues and by their study...."

(Daniel O'Connell, interviewed in the video *Our American Roots*)

Freedom of the pulpit is a concept that goes deep into our history. The Reverend Thomas Starr King, in 1856, gave a sermon in which he said:

"Brethren, it isn't a question of what you want to hear, or don't want to hear; it is simply a question of what, with my vision of spiritual laws and human responsibility, *I ought to do.*"

(Thomas Starr King, as quoted in *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, p.69)

You have elected me to spend time thinking about things—theology, the world around us, the lives we're living—and to reflect those thoughts back to you from this pulpit. You have elected me to, to paraphrase Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson, pass my life through the fire of thought and give some of the result back to you.

Talking about freedom of the pulpit, the Rev. Gerald Davis says that:

"The free pulpit...gives me the opportunity to rise above conventional wisdom [and] palatable opinions and speak to the conscience of my congregation... not fearing a backlash, not fearing an open revolt."

(Gerald Davis, in *Our American Roots*)

In researching freedom of the pulpit, I came across a story in the June 17, 1929 edition of *Time* magazine. The story detailed the resignation of an Episcopal priest in Detroit because he could not freely express his views from the pulpit without fear of retribution from his Board or the hierarchy he answered to. The Very Rev. Herbert Lansdowne Johnson was quoted as saying:

"If the gospel cannot be applied to our modern problems, sex, world peace, war, industrial conditions and race relations, of what use is it? The pulpit today ought not to try to preach on the basis of authority, but to try to challenge men's minds. That is what I have tried to do. ...."

"Pulpit vs. Pew," *Time* magazine, June 17, 1929:

We are fortunate that in our Unitarian Universalist tradition, we have covenanted to do exactly this. Ministers are not asked to spout dogma, or toe a line set by the Board. We are given freedom of the pulpit as a "basic premise" of our ministry.

Your votes to call and ordain me give me the freedom—and the obligation—to speak the truth as *I see it* from this pulpit every week, whether or not I think you will agree with it, whether or not I think it's what you want to hear. Those votes ask for me to use that freedom responsibly, but they require that I use it.

Over the course of the next six weeks, we will be engaging in making the covenant between me, as your minister, and you, as the congregation, explicit. We'll be doing this in preparation for the November 4 ceremony in which you will formally ordain me to the ministry and install me as your minister.

That ceremony is just the outward expression of the votes you took last spring. Those votes represent another part of the Cambridge Platform that is important to explore today. It is from that document that we get our modern-day practice that only an individual congregation can call and ordain a minister.

I think it's worth putting this practice in some historical perspective. In 1648, when the Cambridge Platform was finished, there was no such thing as a search committee, or a congregational record, or a ministerial packet. The members of a congregation generally identified someone from within their congregation to be their minister. Often, that young man (and they were all men in 1648) was sent off to Harvard for an education before coming back to serve as minister, generally for the rest of his life.

Thus, the vote to elect a minister—to ordain and install someone as minister of a congregation—was a vote among equal members to give special responsibility to one of their own.

Moreover, that election made that person a minister only to the people who had elected him. In the rare event that a minister moved from one congregation to another (and it was rare then), the new congregation re-ordained the minister.

Now, times have changed. Our congregations have, working together, asked our Association to run a strict credentialing program for ministers to assure basic competencies and quality. In 2007, a congregation does not even meet their potential minister until he or she is the one finalist for the position.

And yet, there is part of the old system I think it's important to retain. While I have fulfilled the numerous requirements for ministerial fellowship in our Association, those things don't make me a minister—only you do. And my ministry is done in relationship with you, and not in some Godly vacuum.

Minister and professor Henry Wilder Foote wrote some sixty years ago that our spiritual ancestors of 1648 rejected the doctrine of the Church of England that

"taught that ordination conferred a mystical and indelible character on the priest which for ever set him [sic] apart from the rest of mankind [sic] and qualified him to serve in his priestly capacity wherever occasion called."

(Henry Wilder Foote, "The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform of 1648," from *The Cambridge Platform of 1648: Tercentenary Commemoration*. 1948)

Thus, when you ordain me on November 4, you are not setting a halo upon my head to be worn for the rest of my life. You will not even, technically, be entitling me to use the title “Reverend” if one day you and I are no longer in the relationship of minister and congregation (though that practice, too, has fallen out of favor). You will simply—and powerfully—be identifying that our relationship is special.

And yet, it is important that our relationship be based in a fundamental equality. Though by virtue of that vote, I have special responsibilities and power here, it is important that you see mine as an equal voice in the covenant we share as a congregation.

It is because of this that ministers called to serve congregations are expected to be members of those congregations, and because of this that I’ve asked Steffani, as President of the congregation, to witness my signing of the Fellowship’s membership book today. Today, I will make the commitment of membership in this Fellowship, with all of the responsibilities that come with it. My signature indicates my assent to our relationship, and to this congregation’s covenant, as expressed in its mission and in its weekly affirmation.

[sign membership book]

(And for anyone out there who would like to join me in the commitment of membership in this Fellowship, this book will be available after the service for you to sign.)

There is another reason why it is important that our relationship be based in the covenant of membership, a covenant of equals. It is because in our free religion, my freedom of the pulpit is and must be balanced by your freedom of the pew.

Freedom of the pew, in a nutshell, means that you, sitting in the congregation when I am in the pulpit, have as much freedom as I do.

On the one hand, I have the right and responsibility to preach the truth as I see it.

On the other, you have the right and responsibility to filter what I say through your own experience and belief systems. Here in this free religious congregation, you have the right to disagree with anything I say, to question anything I tell you, to believe only what fits your understanding of the world, and to engage in discussion and debate about the rest.

Freedom of the pew means that our relationship is based in dialogue. What I say is not automatically right—it does not come from some higher place, it has not been given some bishop’s stamp of approval. It is my life, passed through the fire of thought. Thus, you are invited to respond to it.

Now, there is a time and a place and a way to do that respectfully and compassionately. But it’s what I expect, as your equal in this partnership.

Some ministers interpret the concept of freedom of the pew to include the fact that you are also free to leave this community. While it is true that this is a voluntary association—no one is forced to be here—I don’t think that’s what freedom of the pew means.

I’ve heard too many stories from ministers about members coming up to them after a Sunday morning service and saying things like “if you’re going to preach about *that*, I am resigning my membership.” Those stories make me sad—and I come away thinking that someone did a bad job of explaining what membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation means to those people.

Instead, it is my understanding that what it really means is that in making a commitment to this community, you agree to keep your brain turned on. You agree to pass what I say through the fire of your own thought, and you agree that when we disagree, we’ll talk.

While ultimately, I cannot stop you from leaving if that's what you truly want to do, it is my hope that the commitment of membership means more than can be broken by one (or even a few) disagreements.

It is my hope that our balancing freedoms—of pulpit and pew—mean that we make a commitment to bring our best selves to bear on this relationship. It should mean that we make the time to talk with one another about things we disagree on, and it should mean that we commit to listening to one another before we respond.

As your minister, I pledge to listen when you disagree with me. I pledge to try to understand your point of view, and to take it into account in my leadership here.

I can't say we'll always agree.

In fact, I can pretty much assure you that sometimes we won't.

And that, in the end, is a good thing. It means we're part of a religious movement that values freedom of thought. It means we're part of a faith community that understands that different peoples' experiences will be different. It means that we've come to a place where no one person has a monopoly on the truth.

And that's the kind of religion I want to be a part of. Hopefully, you do too.