

## READINGS for “WE HAPPY HERETICS”

by Don Bailey

May 7, 2007

“Unitarian Universalists are neither a chosen people, nor a people whose choices are made for them by theological authorities—ancient or otherwise. We are a people who chose. Ours is a faith whose authority is grounded in contemporary experience, not ancient revelation. Though we find ourselves naturally drawn to the teachings of our adopted religious forebears, these teachings echo with new insights, insights of our own. Ralph Waldo Emerson did not seek disciples; he sought people who could use their minds and tap their souls as profoundly as he did. In a Unitarian Universalist church, revelation is an ongoing process; each of us is a potential harbinger of meaning. [Forrest Church, xx-xxi]

. . . .

“... In our circle of faith, when two or more gather, a loving argument is a sure sign that the spirit is moving among us.” [xxi-xxii]

“Of course, I am a heretic. The word *hairesis* in Greek means choice; a heretic is one who is able to choose. Its root stems from the Greek verb *haiein*, to take. Faced with the mystery of life and death, each act of faith is a gamble. We all risk choices before the unknown.” [Church; 7]

“As Unitarian Universalists, we are free to choose our beliefs. ... Of course, being free, we are responsible for what we make of that freedom. Freedom may be our forge, but responsibility remains the anvil on which our faith is pounded out and turned to use. ... When we employ our freedom responsibly, directly experiencing the transcending mystery and wonder of the creation, our spirits are renewed and we become open to the forces that create and uphold life.” [Church; 8-9]

“...[A]wakening to the miracle of life entails not so much a discovery of the supernatural, but rather discovery of the super in the natural.

“Each of us, of course, must assume the responsibility for awakening. Others may be responsible for our being born, but what we make of our lives, how deeply and intensively we live, is our

responsibility, and ours alone. Having accepted life as gift for ourselves, we are then charged to revere the presence of this same gift in others.

[Church; 14]

“At the age of twenty-one, ... the failures of religion were clear to me. It fails existentially when it suppresses our individual questions and doubts and when it implies that our experience must fit some predetermined pattern. It fails socially when it becomes superficial, pleasingly aesthetic, or fashionably political. Yet I also knew that mere secular existence often does little better. I had a yearning for community and transcendent values. In short, I wanted an honest religion, one that could both, as Reinhold Niebuhr once said, ‘afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted’.”

[John A. Buehrens; 19-20]

“... ‘The first task in the ministry is to help people feel safe; then the real work can start.’”

[Buehrens, qtg Gwen Langdoc Buehrens; 141]

“... Today I call it my chosen faith: Unitarian Universalism. In its midst I have found the support to keep alive the questions of the

prophets, to be challenged in my moral and religious living. I have discovered a tradition that takes seriously the rights (and responsibilities) of the individual in ethical and religious matters, that recognizes that one of the sources of all effective moral faith is direct experience of transcendent mystery and wonder.”

[Buehrens; 21]

## WE HAPPY HERETICS

**UU Fellowship of Paris**

**Donald A. Bailey**  
**13 May 2007**

20th Anniversary of the UUFParis (March 2006), with John Buehrens (former President of the UUA) as theme speaker:

Purchase of **A Chosen Faith** (by John A. Buehrens & F. Forrest Church, revised edition; Boston: Beacon P, 1998));

Meaning of its title:

- 1) UUs choose their faith; approximately 50% of us “converts”;
- 2) We teach our children to choose; **The Church Across the Street** (by Reginald D. Manwell & Sophia Lyon Fahs; Boston: Beacon P, 1951);
- 3) The Greek root of “Heresy” does not mean “to be in error”, but “to choose” or “to take”!!! Both Christian churches and modern dictionaries hide that fact, though part of the root definition slips back in by its being deemed necessary for the person in error to be also arrogant and

“obstinate” in his or her false belief.

Thus, we UUs are “heretics”, not because we believe in false doctrines (as do all Protestants, in the RC view), but because we consciously & deliberately “choose” our beliefs and encourage others to do so.

It’s essential to choose responsibly:

To choose at all is to assume responsibility for one’s choices. We need to recognize that, no matter what we accept from others and no matter what faith we shape for ourselves, we alone must take the credit or blame for the way we worship and the way we behave. All our historical leaders have emphasized our responsibilities ...

— to apply reason to our religious choices & beliefs;

— to tolerate others, whose reason may well lead in directions different from our own;

— to use reason and experience (personal, scientific, and historical) to form our ethical principles and to evaluate critically the ethical beliefs & practices of the society in which we live, work and play

(one of our responsibilities is to undertake what I call a “loving criticism” of the world);

— yet to recognize that our cultural heritage has already done much of this thinking for us & on our behalf; thus to respect traditions (even as we freshly evaluate all and reject some), to draw on the world’s rich literary heritage (perhaps especially in religion), & to learn from our neighbours; and

— finally, to accept the limits of reason (and never to idolize it!), and so to appreciate the value of spiritual, even emotional,

insights.

Let's not exaggerate our differences from other faiths:

First, once the axioms of their faiths are in place, most religions display highly sophisticated applications of reason; we UUs have no monopoly on thinking, and in fact several other faiths have much to teach us about rigour. But we do often find irrational the identification of and commitment to their starting points. Unfortunately, we sometimes reject other religions' starting points because we are too literalist when hearing what they're saying. (God save us from UUs who are Biblical fundamentalists!)

Second, adherents of other faiths do make choices, whether the tacit choice of remaining in the faith of their ancestors or the active choice of converting to a different faith; and whether recognized and admitted or not, both the institutional tradition & hierarchy and individual believers approach their sacred scriptures selectively. The envelope of any given religion is being pushed all the time by both its theologians and its private adherents, but there are always limits to the extent such freedom is tolerated. I am arguing that only UUs are explicitly and passionately encouraged, not only to push the envelope, but even (if this doesn't change the metaphor too much!) to think outside the box. That is, we're heretics by dogma; we're encouraged to be critically contentious.

Sociological studies of religion in North America have revealed that, while most religious groups diverge widely within themselves over ethical & social values, UUs possess a startling coherence & similarity. We need to ask: Why would this be so?

— We need to concede at the start, of course, that our largely first-generation membership makes us a more self-selecting religious group, who are attracted by similar values in the first place; had we all

grown up in the faith over several generations, our ethical & social values might well be more diverse.

— But I'd also argue that we are more coherent in our views because, unencumbered by dogma, we are free to use our reason to make choices and to follow the spirit of conscience directly! That is, we needn't rationalize the defense of our choices to make them fit propositions from another realm.

— That is, even if we grant that the world is a complicated place, that accurate & sufficient information is hard to accumulate, to criticize, & to act upon, and that different groups & individuals have genuine, sincere & ethical reasons for disagreeing about societal vision & political goals—nonetheless, if we work with only secular assumptions and empirical information, we should be able, if only occasionally to agree, at least to share a mostly similar basis (i.e., secular/scientific basis) for discussion.

— Doing critical, discipline thinking is hard work and takes practice; so why wait to start to apply it only in the outside, secular world? ...why not practise it as early as religious study and discussion, in childhood?

— So why complicate & interfere with these necessary societal assessments and political decisions by adding in so-called other-worldly imperatives, especially since these distractions are, if not human-made (let's concede the point at this level), then at least profoundly human-interpreted?

— Most of the world's evil no doubt comes from raw selfishness, an urge to dominate, diverse prejudices, or various

psychopathologies. But in addition, too much of the world's evil — too many of its malevolent & disastrous enterprises — originate not just in the arrogant & self-proclaimed righteousness of most religions, but in the perversions & rationalizations that their doctrines impose on efforts to analyze real situations for which they may or not be suited. That is, why should we not assess economic inequities, family values & challenges, and clashes among cultural or national groups directly, on their own issues and merits? Why pass these questions through the lens of scriptural revelations, dogmatic beliefs or religious authorities? These lens are not necessarily irrelevant & they may beneficially form part of the value system and individual experiences on which we draw in testing our responses, but they have too often been used to distort and pervert thinking from simple, direct and compassionate solutions, and thereby aggravated the problem or injured the parties involved.

(Relevant here is another sociological study, published by Gregory Paul about two years ago in the **Journal of Religion and Society**, which found higher levels of personal and social ethics in developed secular countries or regions than in developed countries or regions claiming to be more religious. ["Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies: A First Look"])

— Thus, we must proclaim the precious genius of Unitarian Universalism! Lacking received dogmas as an official institution, we are free to pursue & apply our reason to all & sundry of the world's challenges. We, too, can get it wrong, but we're less likely to make it convoluted and less likely to try to impose it on others through laws &



coercive force.

In an etymological sense, we UUs are the only true & thoroughgoing “heretics”: the right & the freedom to choose are our very core & heart, with the principal corollaries being to make our choices ethical & wise and the responsibility to tolerate alternate views. To define UUism in one sentence would be to say: “We are enthusiastic and unrepentant heretics—committed only to freedom, reason, tolerance, and responsibility.” And since our freedom to choose rationally & responsibly brings us such joy, why not say: “**We are *happy* heretics!**”?

— If to choose to be a heretic is the only essential criterion for being a UU, we need to learn better to tolerate, even welcome, our internal diversities: for example, a UU can deny the existence of God altogether or believe that even Jesus was & is in some unique way divine; a UU can put all her or his religious confidence in secular reason or find spiritual inspiration essential to both thinking & worshipping; a UU can be a strident socialist or a dogmatic capitalist; a UU can favour or oppose capital punishment, a just war (are there any?), abortion, or euthanasia.

— We have both the right and the responsibility to exchange & challenge each other’s views, but in almost all conceivable cases, it would be both incorrect & improper to suggest that another UU’s views make him or her a questionable member of our faith. Both our historical traditions since the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the vast diversity of UU beliefs around the world today foreclose the appropriateness of a narrow construction of our faith.

To close on a prideful, if not arrogant, note, I see UUism as one of the few faiths whose fundamental beliefs make natural & compelling a commitment towards inter-cultural

tolerance, social justice, democratic politics, international peace, and ecological husbandry. Like anyone else, we can be wrong and we can be obstinate. But our errors are self-correcting by our commitment to reason & justice, and our obstinacy can be reined in by our commitment to tolerance & diversity. We possess neither revealed scriptures nor ecclesiastical hierarchy, so our faith in freedom, reason & tolerance is unfettered by arbitrary & unchallengeable “Truths” or by authoritarian individuals or institutions. We have the right and the responsibility to CHOOSE our beliefs freely, rationally, and ethically.

**What can be happier than that?!?!**