

“Standing on the Side of Power”

by UU Minister Rev. Munro Sickafoose

This essay expresses two main contentions. First, that Unitarian Universalism has been misguided into adopting what can only be called a fundamentalist stance by a small group of religious reactionaries, and that this not only damages our faith, but our broader social justice efforts in our communities. The second contention is that they have done so through the misuse and abuse of power of governance, and by undermining our polity and the tenets of our faith through theological and ideological error.

This has been done without any real consent or understanding by our congregations of these changes, and without the necessary debate that should accompany such a radical shift.

ARAOMC as Fundamentalism

I first encountered the doctrine and dogma of ARAOMC (Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, Multiculturalism) at Starr King School for the Ministry (SKSM). I entered as an M.Div. student in the Fall of 2008 as a distance learner, and took remote classes in whatever interested me. I had some very cool and open-minded teachers. In 2010, I moved to Berkeley so that I could acquire the necessary residence hours for my degree.

The pedagogy of Starr King at that time was focused on ECO – Educating to Counter Oppressions. The framework was/is ARAOMC. Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression/Multi-Culturalism, a political ideology cobbled together from a number of sources: CRT, the writings of a number of very brilliant people, the concept of intersectionality, and the opposition to mainstream cultural norms, including whiteness, the patriarchy, gender norms, etc.

Now, I agree that many cultural norms are messed up and damage many lives in any number of ways, and that they need to change. I also agree that the legacy of slavery in the USA is painful and harmful, and that this needs to be addressed. As does the even worse genocide of indigenous peoples. As does the laying waste to the environment we are all guilty of. The lists of fucked upped things are plenty long, and justice and compassion call us to try and rectify the harm that has been done, and is still being done.

This essay isn't about my disagreement with any of those goals.

It's about what I see as the merging of an extreme political ideology into Unitarian Universalism, and its transformation into a reactionary religious movement that exhibits all the hallmarks of fundamentalism.

Characteristics of fundamentalism include – in no particular order of importance:

- Strict adherence to a text or dogma that cannot be questioned
- The existence of an Elect to which the truth is given
- The division of people into those who “get it” and those who don’t (woke/unwoke, saved/damned, enlightened/unenlightened, etc., pick your poison.)
- The suppression and excommunication of dissenting voices
- The use of fear, guilt, shaming, scapegoating, gaslighting, etc. as a means of conversion and maintaining power over, rather than power with
- The demonization of some entity, group, or invoking of some abstract force as the reason for the world’s evils. (examples: The Devil, the Serbs , the Jews, capitalism, communism, immigrants, white supremacy culture, and so on ad nauseum.)

There are more, but I think that covers the basics.

I contend that joining woke progressive activism with a particular interpretation of Universalist theology has resulted in a reactionary religious fundamentalism that is more interested in ideological purity and power than actual inclusiveness, and that is alienating and ostracizing when we most need solidarity.

This fundamentalism has rejected our Unitarian heritage, and badly damaged our Universalist heritage as well. It is elitist, highly partisan, and political, not religious. It mirrors the ancient alliance of church and state, of politics and religion. It makes the same mistake progressives have accused the religious right of making. It also partakes heavily of ideas from the Counter-Enlightenment-- against rationalism, universalism and empiricism, which are commonly associated with the Enlightenment. It also uses the goals and tactics of the Counter-Reformation.

It is reactionary because it seeks a return to the days when our Puritan ancestors demanded – and got – strict adherence from its members, and governance was hierarchical, by the Elect. It seeks to impose a ideological viewpoint on our congregations and the larger culture.

It is not Unitarian Universalism as we have known it, nor is it an “evolution” of our faith.

A Culture of the Abuse of Power

This essay is also about what I believe is the flawed understanding of power at the heart of ARAOMC thinking, and the misuse and abuses of power by its adherents. Some of that misuse and abuse is quite deliberate.

Some of the faculty at Starr King tried to convert me to The Gospel of ARAOMC (herein after simply referred to as The Gospel), but once they saw I had questions they either couldn’t or wouldn’t answer, they left me alone – happy to take my money and give me a degree, but certainly not allow me into the inner circle of the Elect.

By nature, I am deeply suspicious of anything presented to me as gospel – something presented as inherently and obviously the truth, something that simply can't be questioned or exposed to critical inquiry. The way this mindset is revealed is simply to ask the question: "What are the biases, flaws, and weaknesses in your theory/beliefs/worldview?"

If you can tell me those, I'm more than willing to discuss what you are proposing. If not, then No thank you very much.

But any Gospel is not about truth, it is about belief. Anytime I asked questions about weaknesses or flaws in The Gospel, I was met with either puzzled looks, or the subject was changed.

I was written off as an old white guy who just didn't "get it". Maybe. But I get lots of things just fine, and blind belief just isn't in my repertoire, or in UU history and theology either.

Writing off people because of their social locations is just plain lazy. It's a form of ad hominem argument, as is claiming that your arguments are valid because of YOUR social location at some place on the power hierarchy.

In any case, Starr King was rife with cliques, the Oppression Olympics, students literally getting in another student's face because of their whiteness, or cisness, or some flawed identity. It could be ugly, and the administration finally had the sense to tamp it down, but only after much damage was done. I pretty much ignored it as I was there to learn to be a minister, something there was less teaching about than you might imagine for a divinity school.

And then the President of the school retired, and it came time to select a new one. And that got really ugly. Several observers – who I will not name for their protection – believe that professors were purged and students were denied their degrees because someone blew the whistle on the discriminatory and unethical actions of the outgoing President in overriding the decision of the Search Committee to select her replacement.

You can read about it in UU World – which is a somewhat impartial version of the events and their aftermath.

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/really-happened-starr-king>

Read the comments, especially those of long time UU's in leadership.

Here's more:

<https://www.danielharper.org/yauu/2015/01/kurt-kuhwalds-thoughts-on-starr-king/>

<https://www.uuworld.org/articles/two-sksm-professors-resign>

As always, read and make up your own mind. Free religion, remember?

I think it's obvious that the school's President and Board reacted just like a corporation of the old white men they claim to be different from. The spin doctors came out in force. People's lives were seriously messed with, and without any due process. Faculty resigned and students left. Many who stayed kept their heads down, and minimized their connections with the school while struggling to acquire their degrees so they could get the credential and get out. There was no restitution. A lot of damage was done, and never made whole again. Academic, ministerial and institutional authority was abused in the service of power.

And to this day, those issues of the abuse of power have never been addressed. "Time to move on and let the healing begin" is the mantra. Shining the light of truth? Restorative justice? Don't make me laugh. It hurts too fucking much.

Functionally, this has meant that the public abuse of power has become normalized and... sanctified... in UU circles. Not that this is anything new. The UUMA, the UUA and MFC, have always been tainted with cronyism and various misuses and abuses of power.

Abusing Power as Theological Error

Let's go back to The Gospel for a moment. At its core, ARAOMC sees all power as hierarchical. Therefore, the solution to oppression is just a matter of flipping the hierarchy and placing those on the bottom on the top for a while, or forever. (This is also called centering, in the parlance of the believers.)

I assert that this is a structural problem inherent in ARAOMC. A problem made worse by the observation that the oppressed seem to have internalized their own experience of the abuses of power so deeply that they seem incapable of doing anything but repeating them. Which is tragic. And even worse, it doesn't break the cycle of abuse of power.

If you see all human relations as hierarchical power relationships to be overturned, then the way you will use power is defined by the view that power is not to be shared with those who don't agree with you. This is also not a very generous view of other human beings, who are way more complicated than ARAOMC dogma would have you believe. It also violates the basic ethical principle of reciprocity.

And as Thandeka pointed out years ago, it falls into the old Calvinist trap of condemning people by their very nature.

Another trap this kind of reductionist thinking creates is the binary trap. Racist/anti-racist, cis/queer, white/BIPOC, and other dualisms become self-reinforcing/codependent binaries in constant struggle – with no real way out of the hall of mirrors they create. Human beings have multiple, fluid, and complex identities that deserve respect and honoring, no matter who they are.

Power is always relational and situational, not permanently affixed to social location, nor some kind of cultural Matrix cast in stone. Any human being can misuse and abuse power – and doing so in the name of some moral or religious end is perhaps the most egregious of such abuses.

I contend that the abuse of power has always been part of the culture of leadership in the UUMA and UUA, and it no longer being abused by a bunch of “old white men”, but by the group of religious radicals that has replaced them– and who are not liberal, but reactionary and illiberal.

And further, I contend that their current abuses deeply undermine the moral authority of our faith and our broader social justice efforts.

Because the claims being made against the dominant culture are ones of abuses of power, you cannot abuse power to “fight” or “dismantle” that culture and claim the moral high ground. Doing so negates any moral or spiritual superiority you may have, because you are guilty of the very thing you claim to be against.

It’s called hypocrisy. And this is not just one of the simple hypocrisies we all engage in our daily lives, but a deep hypocrisy that hides behind a masquerade of justice.

It is a profound theological error as well.

Regulatory Capture and the MFC

Regulatory capture is a form of government failure which occurs when a regulatory agency, created to act in the public interest, instead advances the commercial or political concerns of special interest groups that dominate the industry or sector it is charged with regulating.

For years, the MFC has been a select committee of gatekeepers into UU ministry. Its processes were not transparent and not accountable. Their decisions were guided by a set of conscious and unconscious biases towards women, LGBTQIA+, class origins, and BIPOC. That changed because of social pressures towards equality, diversity, and inclusion. This has been a great and necessary thing.

But then a not-so-curious thing happened. Over the period of a few decades, the MFC became ideological gatekeepers, suppressing intellectual and theological diversity. To pass the MFC into fellowship, you must totally agree with ARAOMC dogma, and if you are white, hetero, and cis, you must confess and do repentance for your multiple pernicious identities. Disagree with this shameful and flawed ideology in the slightest, and you can forget about a career in parish ministry, or being Fellowshipped.

The MFC controls the fellowshipping process in a way that is still not transparent, still not accountable, and is driven by ideological conformity. (They see it as theological purity, I’m

sure.) Instead of changing a flawed process, believers in The Gospel have simply used it towards their own ends – to gain power and control of the narrative.

As a result, the UUMA, the UUA, and the MFC leadership are now totally dominated by those who agree with ARAOMC dogma, who have slowly stacked the deck and cast out, or driven out, any dissenters.

This is not the honest acquisition of power, but shady business. Same as it ever was.

And now, having stacked the deck, they claim the game is fair and that there is agreement and consensus in our faith. But imposed ideological conformity is neither.

Abuse of Power as Culture, Pt. II: Winning Ugly

There have been many abuses of power at the UUMA and the UUA. In the past, the UUMA has swept many abuses of ministerial power under the rug, failed to censure or dismiss ministers guilty of sexual misconduct, financial malfeasance, etc. Departing UUA Staff members have recently voted each other lovely severance packages. You don't have to dig very deep to find the abuse and misuse of power in our leadership.

And then there is the coup that took place in 2017 shortly after the hiring controversy and the resignation of the Rev. Peter Morales. And yes, it was a coup. The reactionaries lost patience and took over the Board. In the ensuing years, believers in The Gospel have discarded any process that could challenge their power – parliamentary procedure and due process to name a couple. They have instituted on-the-fly moderation at GA, shutting down dissenting voices and controlling the outcome of voting. (Nothing new at GA, even pre-coup.) They change the rules to suit their ends, claiming that all past processes are tainted by White Supremacy Culture.

They abuse power to serve their vision. A noble vision in many ways. But abusing power is abusing power, no matter who does it.

It isn't different this time, and it isn't different because of who is abusing power. Meet the new boss, same as the old boss.

By Their Fruits Ye Shall Know Them

True spiritual and moral power is not about being in charge, taking the reins of power and telling people what to do and how to act. That flawed understanding is deeply embedded in ARAOMC dogma, and we now see the results.

The UUMA has censured one of its members for daring to ask questions, claiming harm without offering evidence, and dismissing several of our principles and sources as tools of WSC.

The UUA is beginning to “instruct” our congregations and fellowships that their primary focus is the rooting out of WSC from their hearts and minds and souls, in clear violation of congregational polity and again, against our principles and sources.

The hypocrisy and arrogance of this fundamentalist approach are stunning.

Social change cannot be dictated from the top, and each of us must be free to engage in the struggle for liberation in our own way, for our own reasons, and by our own choosing. That is what free religion is all about.

Fundamentalism and the Loss of Trust

Do I trust my fundamentalist coreligionists to provide honest testimony, as they see it, to their pain and suffering? Absolutely.

Do I trust my fundamentalist coreligionists to provide pastoral care and counseling to the broken and wounded among us? Absolutely.

Do I trust my fundamentalist coreligionists with power? Not a bit.

Do I trust them to lead our faith into the future in a way that honors our UU lineage and polity? NO.

And not just because of their extreme and uncompromising ideological positions on racism, oppression, and other issues.

My observation is that they have repeatedly demonstrated that they can't be trusted with the power vested in them by our congregations. They have used dishonest means to gain that power, and dishonest means to keep it. They seek to govern without the consent of the governed.

They are trying to turn a free religion into a fundamentalist religion, and that is a grave theological error that is in direct contradiction to both our Unitarian and Universalist heritages. This new fundamentalism is not Unitarian Universalism.

Universalism was a movement against the fundamentalist view that humanity was divided into the saved and the damned. Unitarianism opposed fundamentalisms of all kinds in the name of religious freedom. Both were against hierarchies of religious power that dictated belief and action, as is our humanist heritage.

What's Next?

I honestly don't know.

I don't disagree with the goals, only the theory and methods. And wielding religion and politics together has a disastrous history.

If we become a shrill and illiberal faith, I believe we are doomed to irrelevance. There are great challenges facing our world and humanity and all life on Earth, and many of us feel that the direction being taken by our leadership is making the finding of solutions more difficult, if not impossible.

Fighting religious fundamentalism is hard, and harder when they have power, control the narrative and the channels of communication, and misuse their authority. This is even more painful when they are your coreligionists, and they claim to represent you.

I think that the UUA and the UUMA will not be interested in answering these charges, nor are they interested in bringing this conversation "down" into our congregations for extended debate about this shift in our faith.

Orthodoxy by fiat is now the order of the day. Having taken power, they will not relinquish it without a fight. They are utterly convinced of their rightness, and of the error of all who question them.

Where we go next must be up to our congregations, decided in a wider discussion, not by a small group of reactionaries. I hope this can be accomplished, but I fear any such movement will be squashed.

But I think it behooves those of us who have faith in Unitarian Universalism to try.