

“Aw-Shucks”

A Response to Marlin Lavanhar’s Prairie Group Paper

“Aha! & Awe!”

Mark W. Christian

We desire to live together in such affection as will not allow us to feel threatened by our differences—happy in the liberty which encourages each to make their words correspond with their thought, our acts with our conscience. Ours is a non-creedal church—not because we have no beliefs, but because we will not be restrained in our beliefs. Ours is a church of conscience—not because we hold that conscience is infallible, but because it is the meeting place of human beings and God. Ours is a church of reason—not because our minds are free of errors, but because the dialogue of mind with mind and mind with itself, refines religious thought. Ours is a church of moral work—not because we think morality is sufficient religion, but because we know no better way of showing our gratitude to God and our confidence in one another. We dare not fence the spirit, nor close off the sincerity of conversation with which souls must meet in religious association. As others have their ways of religion, so do we have this faith; and in honest difference, we order our lives together.

--“A Liberal Church” Wallace Robbins

Words from an early Prairie Group member come to mind as I consider my response to Marlin’s paper on Unitarianism and Pentecostalism at All Souls Tulsa. Wallace Robbins’ words, “We dare not fence the spirit the spirit, nor close off the sincerity of conversation with which souls must meet in religious association,” visited me regularly as I considered this response. It is that “unfenced spirit” that provides the most obvious point of entry and overlap for the encounter of Unitarian Universalism and Pentecostalism.

Why Me Lord?

When assigned the response to Marlin’s paper about Pentecostalism at All Souls Tulsa, I was incorrectly identified as having grown up in that church. Close, but no. I grew up in the church I serve in Oklahoma City, 100 miles away. While my knowledge of All Souls is not as organic as the program committee imagined—I do have the experience of having grown up with the Preacher’s Kids from All Souls as friends and peers in LRY; I did attend All Souls for a short

time in 1981 while working in Tulsa; and I am grateful for the opportunity to serve my internship at that congregation with Brent Smith as my supervisor. My response to Marlin’s paper draws heavily from my experience of serving the church down the road and having spent a year of internship at All Souls.

The Nuts and Bolts

The transformation underway at All Souls Tulsa is exciting and impressive. I was called to OKC the year after Marlin was called to All Souls. Since 2001 I have stood in awe at Marlin’s willingness to be an agent of change. It is one thing to embark on major change in a moment of crisis. From my perspective Marlin has had the courage to “Fix what ain’t broke” as we Okies say.

Sadly, Marlin does not lift up some of the unique aspects of congregational culture and dynamics at All Souls that favor this encounter in that church that are in short supply elsewhere.

Nothing Succeeds Like Success! Perhaps the most unique systemic reality of All Souls is that the church succeeds. Success is in its institutional DNA. Because of decades of healthy ministerial leadership, the congregation and its leaders are inclined to take risks with a deeply held conviction that they will succeed. This commitment to success is, in my observation, quite real but additionally the system also tends to forgive and quickly forget its less than successful successes. To embark on the bold encounter that is underway at All Souls without a deep institutional expectation of success in these ventures would seem as unwise as the project in Tulsa is bold. I am certain there is an element of “cat herder” in Marlin’s ministry—but my

observation is that the culture at All Souls is more conducive to the kind of leadership necessary to achieve success in this than is the UU norm.

If Not For You. As I reflected on Marlin’s paper I had to wonder if any of this cross-pollination of traditions would be possible outside of the unique settings and personalities that are present in Tulsa and at All Souls. If Bishop Pearson had not been Tulsa based, and had he not had an existing favorable relationship with Reverend Lavanhar, it is unimaginable that we could be reflecting on this venture however promising it may be. If there were no fall from Grace for Bishop Pearson among Pentecostals, would a merger of Unitarianism and Pentecostalism have ever happened? I suspect not. To analyze the lessons that are surfacing in Tulsa is one thing—to expect a similar opportunity present itself in other congregations is, I fear, unrealistic.

But For The Grace of Size. Another of the unique factors that creates an opportunity for success is All Soul’s size. Addition works better than subtraction when it comes to significant change. Introducing the Neo-Pentecostal elements from Higher Dimensions into an existing worship service was wisely accompanied by essentially moving the “Traditional” service to an earlier time. The sheer number of worship-goers required to facilitate this change without creating worship service of far lesser quality is beyond the ken of most UU Congregations. Adding a worship service of a significantly different style puts enormous and unexpected stress on staff, musicians and other church resources¹. I wonder if a congregation that does not have the opportunity of scale present at All Souls could embark on this approach? This question is amplified by the most recent addition of a third “Humanist” service that seems to be intended to

serve a number of needs—including an alternative for members who have reacted less than favorably to the “Pentecostaling” of All Souls. I doubt this encounter could be attempted in a pastoral or mid-sized church.

Theology and Purpose

There are theological and religious elements raised by Marlin’s paper on Pentecostalism and All Souls. That the success of this encounter has required three services of significantly different styles (if not content) raises a fundamental question of whether synthesis of Pentecostalism in a Unitarian Universalist congregational setting is possible. A synthesis may not be required in the long run. Whether long-term synthesis is a goal at All Souls has not been made clear in this paper.

Who Are Human Beings that You Are Mindful of Them? The quote from Wallace Robbins points toward a tension that I have not heard Marlin address in his paper—fundamental differences between orthodoxy and the liberal tradition. Unitarian Universalism, whether in a Christian, Humanist, Pluralist or Pagan form is grounded in an approach to religion that differs with orthodoxy not so much in its aims or methods but in starting place. Orthodoxy begins with a focus on God. The Liberal Tradition begins with the question of Human Beingsⁱⁱ. Whether this is appropriate is a matter of debate. It is clear, however, that while orthodoxy begins with the question of “Who and what is God” that the Liberal Tradition begins with the question of “Who and what are human beings.” Is this a bridgeable gap or a chasm of unreachable ends?

A Formula for Success? Wallace Robbins’ reading speaks of the unfenced spirit but sees that spirit at work in service of human beings not God. As I consider Marlin’s description of the Pentecostal Formula I wonder about core contradictions with the liberal tradition. At first the use of this formula and felt like a form of manipulation. I am not opposed to tools of manipulation but there is a deeper disconnect. To the extent that there is a replicable formula that can engender “awe” that we might add to our historical preference for “aha” moments, I ask to what end we employ the power of that formula. Inside Pentecostalism the power created by that method, the result of that formula, is seen as creating an offering that is turned over to Godⁱⁱⁱ. Because Unitarian Universalists, as a part of the liberal tradition, begins with questions of human beings not questions of God, I wonder if the power we might produce with a similar formula could be turned to God or if we will be unable to escape our native humanism’s inertia to turn this power to anything but human ends. My question is this—can we employ this formula and not feed human hubris? What adaptations do we need to make organically to allow us to turn this power toward the altar of God and not the altar of Humanity?

All By Myself? One of the similarities that the Liberal Tradition and Pentecostalism share—a possibly useful confluence is a common focus is individualism. Both “Awe” and “Aha” are individual revelations. For us, sharing experiences in community legitimizes them. A problematic distinction arises in what happens to the individual when the spirit moves them. Within Pentecostalism, the speaking in tongues is both seen as the revelation and as a revelation. Sometimes the individual’s glossolalia is interpreted but not always^{iv}. In the liberal tradition our “Aha” moments are never really valid until they can be shared and tested in community^v. Any insight, either from God or Human Creativity, which does not incarnate in free association, will

dissipate^{vi}. For us community is the test of revelation. In many cases within Pentecostalism simply having the revelation is sufficient test for community support.

Haven't We Done This Before? Marlin compares the Transcendentalists with the Pentecostals in observing that the Pentecostals have somehow learned to put lightening in a bottle in a way the Transcendentalist couldn't. He attributes much of this success to the Pentecostal Formula that the transcendentalists lacked. In reading of this application of ritual and energy and singing—I was struck by similarities in this formula to the chanting and physical worship of neo-paganism that emerged among us in the 1980s. Can considering how this formula might be applied within Unitarian Universalism be undertaken without an analysis of neo-Pagan liturgy within our tradition?

The Big Opportunity

I agree that our tradition has a saving message that is too often kept locked away behind layers of tradition and protocol. I agree that All Soul's encounter with Pentecostalism has provided a spark that offers to spread the light of faith with people from whom we have too long been isolated. I believe that given that (1) much of what has happened at All Souls Tulsa is situation specific, (2) because few of our congregations could give fair treatment to two or three additional worship services of substantially different style, and because of (3) fundamental differences exist between these diverse traditions, that the lesson to take away is not about Pentecostalism but about institutional life.

There is still a broader message to learn. That message is about leadership and vision. I think the truly inspirational part of the encounter with Pentecostalism at All Souls Tulsa comes from the ability of the church’s ministry, staff and lay leadership, to be poised to take action when a unique opportunity presented itself. This, to me, is the upside of not fencing the Spirit. It means that we hold ourselves open to opportunities that present themselves and be bound to our history—no matter how glorious or inspirational we may believe it to be.

ⁱ See “Should We Add a New Worship Service” in Alice Mann’s, The In-Between Church, Alban Institute 1998, pgs. 46-53.

ⁱⁱ See, for example, David Bumbaugh, “The Marketing of Liberal Religion” in the Journal of Liberal Religion 9, no. 1, page 7-8 in which nine core religious foci are listed without addressing the question of God. See also James Luther Adams’ discussion of the Ambiguity of Liberalism in “Guiding Principles of a Free Faith,” On Being Human Religiously, Beacon Press, 1976, pgs. 5-7. Another expression of this can be found under the entry “Theological Liberalism” on Britannica Online, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/590847/theological-liberalism>. See also James Luther Adam’s essay “A Little Lower Than The Angels” in The Prophethood of All Believers, Beacon Press, 1986, Pgs-179-181.

ⁱⁱⁱ See the discussion of the persistence of Pentecostalism in Heaven Below, Grant Wacker, Harvard University Press, 2001, pg. 10. This is the “Lightning in a bottle” description of Pentecostalism.

^{iv} See Heaven Below, Grant Wacker, Harvard University Press, 2001, pg. 5. See also the section of the Wikipedia entry for “Glossolalia” focused on the 20th century to present for questions around interpretation for the community or whether speaking in tongues is a prayer to God and therefore beyond the need of translation or interpretation.

^v See James Luther Adams’ discussion of “Freedom and Association” in On Being Human Religiously, Beacon press, 1973 for the ability of groups to create social meaning to counter act the individual as an isolated entity.

^{vi} See “The Indispensable Discipline of Social Responsibility: Voluntary Associations” in The Essential JLA, 1998, page 179-184.