

The New Fundamentalists©
A Sermon Offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
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Unity Church – Unitarian, Saint Paul, MN

I can't even begin to answer the question of how many different kinds of fundamentalists there are in heaven, any more than I can answer the ancient theological question of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin!! But I can begin to answer a narrower question: how many different kinds of fundamentalists are there in St. Paul??

We begin today with a story many of you are familiar with. It started with a religious image-- well over 500 years old, that was shown as part of a college lesson in art history. The adjunct professor, expecting that this one particular image, might be problematic for some of her students, let students know on the published syllabus and in advance of the viewing, that the image of the Prophet Muhammed, peace be upon him, would be shown in class. She thought she made it clear that if students did not wish to participate in this discussion they did not have to, and that they would suffer no consequences as a result of avoiding this part of the curriculum. A Muslim student who attended the class came to the professor's office afterwards and told her how offensive and hurtful this was, and then later complained to the Administration of the School. The school later decided not to offer the professor that teaching assignment in the Spring, essentially failing to renew her contract.

If you have been following the local and national news, you know the school about which I am speaking is Hamline University, right here in Saint Paul. And you also know that the story doesn't end with what many describe as the teacher being fired over this controversy. The piling on of blame and retractions gets thicker and deeper. The school's president, herself a woman of color, issued a statement defending the school's decision citing Islamophobia. The local chapter of CAIR, the Council of American Islamic Relations, denounced the showing of an art depiction of the Prophet Muhammed, *peace be upon him*, but the national CAIR leadership entered into the fray by saying that they felt the professor's action was NOT an act of Islamophobia and that there are a variety of opinions and beliefs about showing depictions of the Prophet Muhammed, *peace be upon him*, and that the intention is equally important. Was this to denigrate the Prophet, as the cartoonists of the French Magazine Charlie Hebdo had done? Or -was this in service of a greater understanding of Islam?

But then, the story doesn't end there either! Some voices in academia have long feared that their own academic freedom was being censored. One of the arguments from members of the academy is that colleges and universities should be bastions of free speech and inquiry; done respectfully yes, with sensitivity of course.

However, holding the line of academic freedom as one of the great pillars of our democracy should not be challenged.

This controversy at Hamline University is a microcosm of the struggles this country continues to have – and has had for at least the last century, over entrenched religious views that challenge the premises of our religiously pluralistic society. No one has directly ascribed the word “fundamentalism” to this particular conflict, and yet, we see in so many conflicts today within public institutions here and around the world. These conflicts are from both the religious and secular left and right. Both the religious and secular left and right exhibit qualities that I call the “new fundamentalists,” and represent some of the cultural and religious conflicts we are experiencing today. In thinking about this story here in St. Paul– and the way it has touched off a firestorm of both intellectual debate and emotional responses - I wanted to reflect with you on the nature of fundamentalisms today and how they relates to this month’s theme of Integrity.

Let me start there, because as we continue to acknowledge here at Unity Church – it’s complicated. The public debate about what happened at Hamline has many layers. Both sides in the Hamline controversy are acting from a place of deep integrity. The Muslim student who brought her concerns to the professor believed in her heart that showing a picture of the Prophet was a direct violation of “haram” – that which is forbidden. Although it is not directly forbidden in the Koran, it is alluded to the Hadiths, or sayings and interpretations of the Prophet.

The professor believed that she had taken the necessary and sensitive precautions to respectfully insure that she could use this piece of art as an important vehicle for educating her students about Islam. So the concern is not about integrity. The larger issues have to do with the ways in which we decide that our beliefs, values and positions – often arrived at through thought, devotion, and/or life experience – is the right one, and should be validated, respected and reflected in public policy. What we see is new fundamentalisms that are emerging, on both the conservative and liberal/progressive sides of politics, academia and religion. Let’s take a deeper look at what I mean.

First, what is the original meaning of “fundamentalism” historically? In 1910, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church identified what became known as Protestant Fundamentalism in this country, with unquestionable doctrinal assertions such as the infallibility of scripture, the virgin birth of Jesus, the Jesus’ atonement for sin, the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the historical reality of the miracles of Jesus. But it wasn’t until 1925, when a court case that became known as the Scopes Monkey Trial, highlighted the division between fundamentalism and reason and science. What was the crime Scope’s was accused of? He was a teacher in Dayton, TN who violated Tennessee’s Butler Act, which made it illegal to teach human evolution in any state-funded school.

The trial pitted the Modernists, who believed that evolution was not inconsistent with religion against the Fundamentalists, who believed that the word of God as revealed through the Bible should take precedent over human knowledge. Although Scopes was found guilty, liberalism, science and evolution won the popular opinion. Christian Fundamentalists did not go underground of course, but ever since, they have felt their beliefs, opinions and priorities are dismissed and looked down upon by a society that was becoming increasingly modern, progressive and pluralistic.

However interesting it would be to explore the different manifestations of fundamentalism in religions alone, I am less concerned with the religious history of fundamentalism and more interested in how this way of staking out what you believe in many spheres of our common life has an impact on all of us right now. For today, I want to introduce you to a broader working definition of fundamentalism, from an essay by Samuel Candler, a working definition that makes a lot of sense to me: Fundamentalism is “*the inability or refusal to live comfortably with contradiction, critique or, I would add, complexity.*”¹

Fundamentalism, as we usually think of it, doesn't really start with a creed or a text or even an ideology. I think it starts with a fear – and fear, more than hope, is a powerful driver of institutions. Religions (and I would add, political parties) which either self-describe or are thought of as fundamentalist are motivated by the fear of losing something fundamental to their existence. And what is that? Depending on the culture, it could have several meanings: loss of power and control, especially in patriarchal cultures; fear of cultural change reflected in policies around social issues such as abortion, marriage equality, gender and transgender rights, women's rights; fear expressed replacement theory, that Jewish people and people of color will replace white people; all of this to the fundamentalist is evidence that the world is devolving into greater levels of chaos and anarchy. So the antidote to this fear is to double down and to build up a power base with others who have the same fears, dressed up and expressed in the clothing of a non-negotiable value. After that, whatever nuance may be possible in any legitimate concerns or discussion about these losses, end up being reduced to memes like the slogans on MAGA hats; seemingly simple statements which reduce all complexity down to a phrase. Underneath the phrase, is, of course, the fear.

Now I have to be honest, I am afraid too. I certainly fear some of the reversals of rights that I had considered inviolate; a woman's right to her own body; the right of same sex couples to marry and receive the benefits of marriage; Civil Rights legislation which is constantly undermined by the religious right. But my fear is also with the new fundamentalisms within our own liberal religious community.

¹ Candler, Samuel. What is Fundamentalism and Where Did It Come From? The Symposium, Atlanta, GA, January 18, 2022. [The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, GA]

I remember in 1992, at the General Assembly in Calgary Canada when the entire body voted to formally commit to our Association to the work of anti-racist and anti-oppressive transformation that Unitarian Universalism had begun before, during and after the Civil Rights Movement. It was a stunning moment of solidarity; where those in the room also recognized that what became known as a Journey Towards Wholeness would be fraught with many toils and snares. My fear was not about the journey. My fear was that this majority of hard working, well-meaning white Unitarian Universalists who voted for that commitment would not continue the work – and I included myself in that fear. I was afraid that the daily experience of being white in a predominantly white denomination would privilege enjoying my comfort and discourage me from listening to my discomfort, but more particularly, listening to the voices of discomfort of people of color in our community.

So the fear I carry about fundamentalism is not only about the fundamentalists who are out there – perhaps some wearing MAGA hats, or the ones who fight against women’s reproductive freedom. The fundamentalists I fear the most are the ones inside of us – as Unitarian Universalists – and the one inside of me. Again, these words from the essayist Candler resonated with me when he wrote:

*“We are all of us, to some degree, fundamentalists, content to work within our own system, but sometimes quite afraid of anything beyond it. There is one reason fundamentalists irritate us so much: they reflect so naively and baldly what can be true about all of us. They show us our own fear of exploring anything beyond our own system of belief.”*²

Unitarian Universalism is not exempt from our own varieties of the new fundamentalism. One such fundamentalism was exposed by a controversy initiated by what we now call using the meme “the Gadflies”. It started the Rev. Todd Eklof came to the 2019 General Assembly held in Spokane WA, with a plan he had not disclosed to the GA managers to sell his self-published book called: “The Gadfly Papers: Three Inconvenient Essays by One Pesky Minister.” In the book, Eklof takes aim at what he feels is Unitarian Universalists commitment to “safetyism”, identity politics and political correctness, which he claims is corroding Unitarian Universalists commitment to freedom of speech and freedom of expression. His book raised concerns particularly among religious educators, people of color, trans people and other groups addressed in the text in ways that those reading it felt was harmful and hostile and in some cases, a slanderous misrepresentation.

Rev. Eklof was asked to stop distributing his book at the General Assembly until such time as a substantial conversation could occur. He was unwilling to engage in any meaningful conversation about accountability for his actions.

So, if I could summarize the key issue here; it’s this: Eklof’s position and those who agree with him feel that Unitarian Universalism has lost its historical

² Ibid, What is Fundamentalism and Where Did it Come From?

commitment to free speech and the right to engage in robust debate and argument, particularly around issues of who may be harmed by such debates. He and others would argue that our commitment to anti-racist and anti-oppression have created an environment in which anyone who disagrees with the philosophy or practice of it is shut down or silenced. He has stated that using reason, logic and science to demonstrate the falsehood of feelings is fundamental -- there's that word! -- to Unitarian Universalism. Is some of that true? Yes. Like it or not, there is always some truth in whomever we decide represents the "other side." But -- fundamentalist perspective narrows our thinking into a single story -- and our experiences are far more complex than that.

Before that 2019 General Assembly ended, nearly 500 white Unitarian Universalist ministers signed a letter which countered Ekloff's actions and views with these points:

First, that White Supremacy Culture is alive and well within Unitarian Universalism; that we believe our siblings of color as the experts in their own life experience; when unjust power structures and those who benefit from them are exposed and critiqued, backlash is predictable; and "neither the perspectives espoused in this publication, nor the harmful process by which it was distributed, represent our understanding of competent, compassionate, courageous UU ministry." I was one of the signatories on that letter and I still stand by that decision. Embedded in the letter is this question: *What, we wonder, would be possible if the creative energy of our leaders were freed up from reacting to instances of resistance and harm, and instead were channeled into imagining, building, and experimenting with practices that embodied the kind of liberation and wholeness that is the core yearning of our faith?*

So, there have been a lot of words and thoughts, theories and essays written about this controversy in Unitarian Universalism since 2019. At the risk of simplifying a very complex situation, I think too many of the arguments we might read about this controversy are missing an essential core at the center of our faith as I understand it. Our faith is not rooted solely in intellectual understandings or beliefs about complex or obscure theological ideas. The core of our faith is covenant, which means we are rooted in relationship. In relationship yes, to historical Unitarian Universalism, but more important, to real, living, breathing people. And for relationship to be real, you have to engage.

We must talk with one another, and we must talk with one another not just to articulate our ideological positions, but to hear how my experience and needs have the potential to harm you. We're not snowflakes; we're resilient, but we become resilient by having hard conversations with and among us.

Remember what that essayist Candler said earlier: "The one reason fundamentalists irritate us so much is they reflect on what can be true about all of

us.” So Unitarian Universalism has wrestled with its own fundamentalisms – some more pronounced in the past and some very much alive. Let me give you an example of what I mean. In the course of my ministry, I have spoken with people who grew up Catholic but who – for whatever reason – no longer consider themselves exclusively Catholic. However, they continue to have a love of and appreciation for Catholic liturgy and sacramentality. Their Catholic roots are not a burden, but an on-going blessing. Yet, I’ve heard many former Catholics UU’s refer to themselves as recovering Catholics, as if Catholicism was a disease to be cured of. I understand that for some that phrase helps them to deal with the religion of their childhood. For those former Catholics who don’t have that experience, that phrase can feel dismissing and even insulting. And here’s the rub of living in a progressive, liberal faith: Both stories can be true.

The “recovering Catholic” may have used that phrase to express the freedom they now feel from a harmful past. For the Unitarian Universalist who embraces Catholicism, finding a faith that warmly embraces their Catholic background with curiosity not judgment could feel liberating. Can both these expressions co-exist in one room – in one church in a way that these deep experiences can be heard and validated? Can each of us be more mindful of the fact that my absolute truth may not be your truth? And that my biases, my tendencies towards the truth I have found in my experiences could be hurtful to you? Some Unitarian Universalists’ discomfort and sometimes disdain for all things Christian not only marginalizes us with those who cherish their Christian roots, but it reinforces a certain fundamentalist belief among some of us that Unitarian Universalism cannot be a both/and/more faith.

This is my struggle with the fundamentalism that lives inside of me. As a person steeped in white culture, love of reason, logic and order is my first go-to place. As a woman who was assumed not to have any of those qualities, I cherished them as necessary to my survival in this career.

Yet, those very qualities are the same ones that can make me blind to the realities of experiences that are vastly different than my own. It has been my colleagues and lay members of the congregations I’ve served, both white and people of color, who have, out of love for me and for this faith, countered my own fundamentalist tendency to make everything logical and clear, and in so doing, helped me to understand how much more nuanced and yes, beautifully complex this faith of ours is.

Here's what I have come to in my own struggle – the antidote to fundamentalism is not logic, but grace. The religious definition of grace is supernatural intervention – but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about the simple elegance of courteous goodwill. The reason I'm here – and perhaps the reason why you're here too – is because you value the ways in which Unitarian Universalism keeps widening the embrace of more. Religious fundamentalists think we're all going hell. I don't believe in their idea of hell. I have my own. My idea of hell would be to spend all eternity with people just like us; a kind of Pleasantville, where there is no conflict – no struggle – no depth – no growth.

Think back for a minute on that poem you heard Worship Associate Jim read as this sermon. I've had to read it several times to really get at what the poet was saying. But then, I realized the irony of the fundamentalists ALL going to heaven – fundamentalists of different kinds and faiths– all having to live for all eternity – with each other – each insisting on their own dogmatic, righteous and fundamentalist beliefs.

The poet writes: “The end of all their expectation is literal in the evening light
Where they must dwell at least forever--Elbowing the saved.”

Unitarian Universalists have long proclaimed that we human beings have the capacity, if we have the will, to create heaven on earth, and maybe the first step we can take is watching out for our own sharp elbows.