

The Protestant Earthquake of 1517

October 8, 2017
Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones, preaching
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #360, Here We Have Gathered¹; #26 tune only, with text Coffee, Coffee, Coffee; #1009, Meditation on Breathing; #118, How Can I Keep from Singing.

Vocal solo: #18, What Wondrous Love Is This?

Piano solo: Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring, J.S. Bach.

Introduction to singing “Coffee, Coffee, Coffee”

The sermon today is about the Protestant Reformation, which rocked the world 500 years ago. Among the many ways in which Protestant movements have shaped religion and culture has been through a diversity of music. Today’s choices of music reflect a few aspects of that variety, and you can read notes in your order of service about the origin of the music. In the case of hymns, you’ll see if words have been revised or added by Unitarian Universalist writers. Our next hymn uses a [tune called “Nicaea.”](#) It was used for a hymn about the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.

Today we sing this in honor of Coffee Donation Month at UUSS. All month long, we will bring bags or containers of ground coffee to replenish our cupboards and help our Coffee Hospitality volunteers. You can drop yours off at a table in the Welcome Hall or in our Coffee Kitchen. Cash donations are welcome too, and so are boxes of tea bags. However, we have no hymn for tea. Now please rise for this heretical hymn. Ina will play it all the way through first. Then we’ll sing, full strength!

Coffee, coffee, coffee,
Praise the strength of coffee.
Early in the morn we rise with thoughts of only thee.
Served fresh or reheated,
Night by thee defeated,
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.

Coffee, the communion
Of our Uni-Union,
Symbol of our sacred ground, our one necessity .
Feel the holy power
At our coffee hour,
Brewed black by perk or drip or instantly.²

¹ Revised text, verse 2, 3rd line: “we of all ages, neighbors, kindred, friends/ learners and sages, sharing what we can.”



German anti-Catholic cartoon (1520) contrasting Lutheran preaching (“The Lord God Says This”) with that of their Catholic opponents (“The Pope Says That”).

Sermon

When he passes the serving bowl of creamy red curry to me over the table in the Thai restaurant, I don’t know that this second date will be our last one. What could go wrong? Both of us are clergy serving congregations. We talk about seminary experiences—mine longer ago than his. He’s from a Trinitarian Christian denomination that’s liberal and allows gay clergy. But otherwise I’m finding out he’s rather traditional, and full of strong opinions.

He asks about Unitarian Universalism. Maybe you know my answer: In the United States, both sides of the UU family came out of New England Calvinism. Unitarians rejected the doctrine of human depravity. They saw Jesus as a human being only. The life of Jesus demonstrates the beauty and possibility in every person. The Universalists rejected the ideas of heaven for only an elect few and hellfire for the rest of us. God is love, they said, and salvation is universal. Then I tell him about the UU Seven Principles, though I don’t have them completely memorized. Then he asks me:

² Words (1990) by Rev. Christopher G. Raible. Tune “Nicaea” (1861) by John Bacchus Dykes, at #26, #39 or #290 in *SLT*.

“What is your worship service like?” More or less Protestant in structure, I say, reflecting our heritage. So I survive this round of questioning.

Next we are talking about favorite hymns. I say: “We have some of the same tunes as you’ll find in Christian hymnals, but we’ve changed some of the words. For example, ‘Nicaea,’ the tune.” (You know, “Holy, Holy, Holy.”) [We now hear a few measures from #26]. “We have three texts for it in our hymnal. We took out references to the Trinity in two versions of that hymn, and took out God from a third one.” And I smile. I think it’s funny. He doesn’t.

“What!” he shrieks. “That’s what it’s about—the Trinity. You *can’t* change the words. You should go write your own songs. Knock yourselves out, Unitarians. But stealing Nicaea, that’s outrageous.” He rants for a while in this unapproving way; I can’t even get in a word to say we do write some of our own hymns.

The handwriting is on the wall for the two of us...but I’ve already bought our theater tickets. When the bill comes, he says, “Let me buy dinner. It’s the least I can do...”

“After insulting me,” I reply. Yes, this is our last date.

He was mad that we’d written new song lyrics for that famous Trinitarian tune. I didn’t have the nerve to tell him we also sing a parody by the name of “Coffee, Coffee, Coffee.” But it’s not in the hymnal—it’s not public.

You could blame all this on the Protestant Reformation. Starting 500 years ago, it set religion in the Western world on the slippery slope of innovation and upheaval. Once people go outside the familiar embrace of age-old rules and institutions, you never know how things will turn out.

The Protestant Reformation began in Western Europe in the early 1500s. Yet, as Alister McGrath has written, the leaders of it “did not know they were in a Reformation.”³ They didn’t even know they were in Europe! That is, the modern concept of a nation state with clear borders had not yet emerged. Kingdoms and principalities were organized by language and culture. People knew themselves by local identities, not as whole nations.

And in that continent of kingdoms, the one unifying institution was the Catholic Church. Yet over time the church’s forays into power politics, its wealth, and the extravagant lives of its bishops and popes began to weigh on people. As the church degenerated spiritually, as it strayed far from the Gospel values of Jesus, there was nevertheless a rising interest in personal religion and spirituality among the people. Levels of literacy grew among French, Dutch, Italian, German, and other peoples. The new technology of printing made the Bible available to ordinary Catholics--available in translations they could read. Families and neighbors could wrestle over the meaning of Scripture, and compare it with what they heard and saw in the church. If they couldn’t find the Divine in church anymore, they could connect with God in their own prayers and through their own Bible.

The printing press made other books available too. A mega-best-seller of the Renaissance was entitled *The Handbook of a Christian Knight*, written by the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus. Along with spiritual and moral advice useful to knights and peasants alike, it criticized the church. In addition to having books at hand, more people pursued local forms of religion—that is, non-church rituals that were focused on the daily struggles of peasants, such as their hopes for the weather,

³ Alister E. McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1990). All McGrath quotations are from this.

their needs for a successful harvest, and their prayers for the survival of infant children.

While most folks worried about staying alive, the church exploited the reality of death. It sold indulgences—relics and other items. In buying an indulgence, a grieving family could guarantee that the soul of their dearly departed would go to heaven. The church even had advertising slogans. One slogan went: “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”⁴

All this was too much for Martin Luther, a monk from a German peasant family. He had quit law school to pursue theology. He became a monk in the Augustinian Order and a professor at Wittenberg University. It made him angry when German parishioners paid for indulgences and the money ended up in Italy, all to make the Roman headquarters even more lavish. He had other complaints about church corruption as well. And on October 31, the night before All Saints’ Day, Martin Luther wrote up 95 accusations—his 95 theses. He nailed them to the door of a church in Wittenberg. That started the earthquake, 500 years ago this month.

Luther wanted to clean up the church, not start a new church, but that’s what happened. He kept writing and arguing. He’d grown up as a fighter, having had a rough childhood on the streets of a mining village. He was formed by its “culture of vicious insults and brutal argumentation.”⁵ Imagine how this worked out for Luther when Catholic authorities called the monk to account. Their condemnation of him spurred his movement into a separate institutional identity. He gained a following—among peasants first and nobles later.

Indeed, Luther’s blunt, anti-authority spirit was part of the inspiration for the

Peasants’ War of 1524. Peasants demanded agrarian reform. They resisted oppression by landlords and nobles. Some leaders of the Reformation endorsed the peasants’ cause. Luther, however, sided with the nobles. So, the peasants lost—100,000 people died. If that’s not bad enough, nineteen years after that, he wrote a long, hateful treatise against Jewish people. Viciously he urged repression of Jewish religious leaders and practice. In more recent years, Lutheran leaders in Germany as well as other nations have condemned Luther’s anti-Semitism.⁶

With so much about him not to like, what was it that Luther contributed? *Salvation by grace*. Before the Reformation, heavenly salvation came only by merit—by your good works, by your membership in the Church, and by the sacraments which only the Church could offer—Baptism, Last Rites, and a Funeral Mass, among others. In contrast to that mediating role of the church, Luther said that nothing stands between anyone and their God. Not a religious official, not a ritual. Salvation comes through one’s personal faith. Salvation is not earned or bought, but given by God as a gift of grace, he said.

This was the seismic shift of the Reformation—a shift away from institutional control, into a focus on the Divine’s relationship with an individual person and that person’s spiritual experience.

The Reformation spirit would show up in diverse forms in many other places. And because of the never-ending innovations wrought by the spirit of the Reformation, there is not one thing you can call Protestantism, there are many Protestant-isms all around the world, especially in the United States. We could not do

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ Elizabeth Bruenig, “Luther’s Revolution,” *The Nation*, July 12, 2017, 32. <https://www.thenation.com/article/martin-luthers-revolution/>

⁶ Indeed, a UUSS member who was a child in prewar Germany told me that in her Lutheran Church confirmation course there was no mention of Luther’s aggressive writings against Jews.

justice to them in one sermon or even one book. But briefly, it's worth looking at Calvinism.

Almost 20 years after Martin Luther's German protest, John Calvin led a French Reformation. A pastor, Calvin was a French-speaking intellectual in the city of Geneva. In contrast to Lutheranism, Calvin's legacy is known as the Reformed tradition. From this tradition came the Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Congregational churches, among others. And the others include Unitarian Universalism.

This is rather odd, when you consider that the first Unitarian martyr in history was burned at the stake in 1553 at the urging of John Calvin himself. Michael Servetus was a Spanish physician, philosopher and scientist. Servetus wrote anti-trinitarian books—two books—arguing what the church needed to do to *restore* the Christianity of Jesus. He was one of those passionate geniuses that other passionate geniuses just can't stand. Somehow Servetus ended up in Geneva, and was arrested. Calvin had the city council convict Servetus and burn him, along with his books. These days the City of Geneva has a monument commemorating Servetus and apologizing for his death. "Sorry."

Twenty-five years ago in seminary, that is all I learned about Calvin, and all I thought I needed to know. Yet last year my dissertation adviser directed me to a book about his influence on Western culture. In it I learned how much of our culture has been shaped by Calvin's movement—that is, government, art, science, economics and basic western world views. Even where God and religion are not at issue and not mentioned, the imprint of Calvinism remains in secular society.

In the words of Alister McGrath, Calvinism's imprint is like "the persistence of a crater in the [landscape of culture], when the original force of its explosion has been spent."

For example, Calvinism led to a compulsion to work hard, do good, gain wealth.

The reason was not that your efforts and success would win you God's blessing; no, in Calvinism, worldly success was evidence that you *already had* God's blessing. Today the idea of a work ethic seems like an American secular trait. We admire folks with a good work ethic. Often we are praised by others for our work ethic with no reference to God—but perhaps it shows our desire to feel worthy and be seen as worthy. Success makes us feel better about ourselves—about our character, about our soul.

Another example: rather than retreating from the world, Calvinists felt called to engage with the world—in education, politics, and government. The town hall meetings of New England owe their origins to the practice of covenant in early Calvinist communities. It was from those colonial communities that Unitarianism arose in America. Briefly, here is how.

In the 1600s and 1700s, Puritan settlers ran the Massachusetts Bay Colony. They were Calvinists. In 1648, delegates from their churches met in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They made an agreement on how they would relate to one another. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 said that each congregation would be governed and supported by members of its local parish. *That's what we do!* Though each congregation was independent, they would stay in fellowship—in covenant. The congregations would offer one another assistance, advice, and scolding as needed.

It was among those churches that some liberal ministers caused a revolt known as the Unitarian Controversy, in the early 1800s. Some of the ministers and their churches became Unitarian. Yet even as their theology became Unitarian and liberal, what didn't change was their well-off social class or their attitudes about the world. Calvinists felt called to change the world—and run it. So did New England's Unitarians. From this legacy of Calvinism, Unitarians were engaged in the civic

matters of their day—leading with confidence, feeling they knew the right way to run things.

Perhaps this is like the work ethic—you try to show the goodness of your soul by being a good leader and a tireless one.

Universalism also was a revolt against Calvinism, especially its idea of predestination. In the arguments against who's predestined for hell and who's elected for heaven, the Universalists preached that everybody's predestined for heaven. As one UU minister has put it, Universalism was predestination, turned on its head.

Aside from the ways the Reformation has shaped the western world, and aside from the Reformation roots of Unitarianism, there's an even more important legacy.

This is the idea of *reforming* to begin with. The idea that improvement is always possible. It's called the Protestant Principle. It's the idea that no endeavor is perfect. Nothing is beyond examination or criticism, including your own heritage, your own ideologies and opinions, or your own ways of doing things.

The Protestant Principle was a concept of Paul Tillich, a great liberal theologian of the 20th century. As a minister in Germany, Tillich served in the First World War as a chaplain. His traumatic ordeals revealed to him the demonic nature of rigid ideologies and the tragedy of *us-versus-them* thinking. After the First World War, Tillich became a professor of theology in Germany, but under the Nazi regime he was fired from his post. He joked that he was the first non-Jewish academic to be so honored. He became a U.S. citizen in 1940 and taught at American seminaries.

To Tillich, every system of belief and every institution is imperfect.⁷ Every one of them is up for criticism, even the beliefs and

institutions you love dearly. Every ideology—religious or secular—needs to be examined.

The Protestant Principle warns against thinking there is one correction for all times, one singular fix. He calls this kind of thinking “utopian certainty.”⁸ He says it's demonic and it's dangerous. Now, I can imagine, in the tragic and scary times in which we live, most of you are not caught up in utopian certainty right now. Perhaps it feels more like aimless confusion. Well, in addition to guarding against having the right answers, or just the right fix, the Protestant Principle warns us against giving up. It's not unusual for the shape of our world or the pain of our lives to lure us toward cynicism, and then to resignation. Tillich saw cynicism and resignation as the flipside of utopian certainty. This makes cynicism no less demonic, no less dangerous than utopian certainty.

In between certainty and cynicism is hope. We must work to be self-observant, try to be honest about what we see, and then act with courage, humility and hope.

Through every time of challenge or fear, this principle calls us to renew our faith in the power of love and creativity.

In communities of dialogue and reflection, at our best moments we consider creative possibilities together. We try them out, and examine the results. In community and in our own lives, we can practice keeping an open mind for creative possibilities and opportunities. We can keep an open heart for hope and love.

May we move into the days ahead with an acceptance of imperfection, and the courage to consider creative possibilities and opportunities. May we remember the blessing of dialogue in fellowship. May we remember the beauty and potential of every person and of all people, together. Amen.

⁷ Roger L. Shinn, “Tillich as Interpreter and Disturber of Contemporary Civilization,” by Roger L. Shinn, in *The Thought of Paul Tillich*, edited by James Luther Adams, Wilhelm Pauck, and Shinn (San Francisco, 1985: Harper & Row), 52.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.