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The Unitarian Approach

I had never heard of a “Unitarian Universalist” until my friend told me all about it on the first day of this class as we were sharing our religious backgrounds. And through this ethnographic experience, I got a chance to explore some of the ideas behind Unitarianism. Due to the time constraints of this project, my understanding is, with no doubt, extremely limited and feebly scratches the surface. With that said, I attempt to find answers about how Unitarians fit into the religiously pluralistic America and perhaps add more onto the conversation about religious plurality in modern day America.

Before going to the service, I quickly looked over their website to get an overall sense of what they believed in, their guiding principles, and practices. These Unitarians adhere to seven principles which all revolve around love, compassion, and respect for everything and anything. Principles include “justice, equity, and compassion in human relations” and “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” (Unitarian Universalist Association). To my initial surprise, these seven principles make no explicit mention of God or Jesus Christ, with the closest thing being the word “spiritual’ in the third principle, a theme that rang throughout the service I attended and the people I talked with. God seemed to take a backseat with this community and less prioritized over social justice.

Before examining the structure of the service, it is crucial to first understand the way the Unitarian Universalists present themselves to the rest of Amherst. As I arrived, one would be remiss if they did not see the two flags that decorate the front of the building. These flags, one supporting the “LGBTQ” community and one supporting the “Black Lives Matter” movement, gives a general sense of the progressiveness of this church, or what a member refers to as an “agnostic meetinghouse” which I find a more suiting description. Seeing those two flags, I got a sense that this place prided itself on its inclusivity and that social justice and political activism united them.

As I walked in through the side of the building, a tiny welcoming area greeted me where perhaps ten to fifteen members stood about chatting and welcoming others. I immediately noticed the demographics of the place. Most of the members were in their 60s or 70s and mostly white. I maybe saw three to five families with kids. I associated social justice with the youth but seeing the members that made up the service was a pleasant sight; however, I felt a sense of contradiction that I could not reconcile. How could this place advocate itself on being open and inclusive to all when most of their members were old and white?

Walking into the room of the service, I gained a better sense of the familiarity of the place. There were no grand and metaphorical paintings or stained glass. Hard, uncomfortable pews only decorated the sides of the room, with plastic foldable chairs dominating the center. This place seemed to not care about looking like a strict religious service. It was a very laidback service: people dressed as they please and people walked in late.

The service started with music and a lighting of the chalice. Opening words are said, without one mention of God, and then there is a hymn. After the hymn, we sang the children out to their Sunday schooling while the rest of the service continued. Candles of joy and sorrow were lit to show solidarity with one another, followed by meditation and silence. Interestingly, they defined it as meditation, not prayer, fitting into the agnosticism that underscored this community.

After the silence, the rest of the service focused on Thanksgiving with a social justice framing to it. The woman leading the service urged us to be aware of the harmful traditions and historical context of Thanksgiving. This part, similar to other parts, lacked God but in its place was themes of social justice. In her speech, she critiqued certain Thanksgiving traditions, even jokingly defining traditions as “peer pressure from the dead” and encouraged us to actively participate in Thanksgiving instead of giving in to traditions that could be harmful or offensive to Native Americans. I find out later that the women who lead the service was not the person who usually leads the services but was a member of the congregation, another example of the inclusiveness and familiarity that replaces the rigid structure and hierarchies seen in other religious communities, such as Catholicism. Afterwards, we held hands in one big circle as we sang to close out the service, a literal physical gesture of unity and togetherness.

In the social hour that took place after the service, I got a chance to talk with some of the members and hear more about their experience with the church. One big theme that ran through their experiences was the irreligiousness yet good moral principles drawing them to the church. One member in his 60’s or 70’s who moved here four years ago said he was part of an ethical society back in D.C. and coming to Amherst, this community seemed to be the next best thing. He never mentioned God as a reason. It was about being in a community that cared about the fair treatment of others and the Earth. He briefly mentioned a six-week crash course he took on the history of White Supremacy, showing an active desire to be aware and informed about their surroundings. This mentality pervaded the conversations I had with everyone I talked to.

Another member also in his 60’s who moved here from Washington state, pointed out the desire for social justice to be a uniting factor. The church regularly helped the local community by donating food, clothes, and providing shelter to those that need it. Not only that but he commented on their desire for “Green Action” as well. For instance, they divested from fossil fuel stock holdings, opposed pipelines from being built in Massachusetts, and supported eating locally and sustainably (Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst).

I also had the chance to talk with a member in his early 20’s, a stark contrast to the older members. He highlighted the agnostic appeal of the Unitarian Universalists. In his words, “it is a place that didn’t say you were going to hell”. The place was welcoming, relaxing, and warm. He also, without fear of judgement, spoke of his desire to convert to Judaism because the music captivated him, and he wanted to learn Hebrew. Other members cheered him for his decision. His choice to do what felt right to him was celebrated, not shunned by the others. One member succinctly defined this as being a “world citizen”: being open, inquisitive, and receptive of new and different ideas. I learned many Unitarians encourage their kids to explore different religions and beliefs outside of what they know.

In the context of religious pluralism, this community in itself appeared to be a microcosm of religious pluralism. General moral principles and a desire for social justice binded them together, but no one in this community shared the same fundamental values or dogmas of organized religion. Even though they lack religious dogma, their pursuit of actively understanding and respecting different beliefs helped them create an environment where people from different backgrounds can come together. Robert Wuthnow, in *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* asserted that mere tolerance of religious diversity was not enough, and our increasingly pluralistic society required more understanding, but what does that mean?

I do not have a definite answer, but it would be a step in the right direction if we approached this issue as Unitarians where respect, compassion, and a deeper understanding of life motivated them; however, given the demographics of this community, it perhaps is a dreamy fantasy that only those in their olden ages and maintain relatively comfortable lives can afford to fight for. If I had more time to explore this community, I would like to investigate this disconnect between the diversity the Unitarians promote with the lack of diversity within the actual community and how they fit into the machinery of social justice when most of their members are of a certain demographic.

Ending on a more optimistic note, this group of extremely progressive Unitarians offers us an example of a united, inclusive, and compassionate community that comes from, not mere tolerance, but engaging with the world around us. From confronting the structures in place that affect marginalized communities to wanting to protect the Earth to encouraging unrestricted explorations of truth and meaning, the Unitarian Approach of understanding not only protects and promotes religious diversity but gives it newfound meaning and significance in a diverse America.

Works Cited

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