

## **Towards A New Horizon**

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Some people think that unlike other faiths our in-ability to define or rather to have one definition of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist is a sign of weakness rather than strength for UU the world over. I was recently asked (what I considered to be) a very awkward question and the question was 'what is unique about a Unitarian Universalist that distinguishes him or her from the others?' That the question came from an elite Unitarian in my church make it more difficult for me to answer the question. My answer was 'you know our respect for individual freedom of belief, dignity of an individual human being, tolerance to other who may not have similar belief or thoughts as ours.' Then he said 'Gandhi also shares all those values and that does not make him a UU. So do other great people in the World.'

It is true that people who belong to other faith have something that is unique that easily distinguish them from others. I do not mean their physical appearance like the turban of the Sikh, the beard and the burqa of the Muslim, the sindur or the tikka of the Hindus, or even the rituals that they perform in public or in private. My concern is more of the common trait or attitude to the prevailing situation that the individual of various faith have; including their common belief. A Catholic can be easily identified by the way he makes a cross mark by pointing his fingers starting from his forehead, or his allegiance to the Holy See than to any other authority. Last Papal election when Josef Ratzinger (dare I call him God's own Rottweiler) was elected to be the Pope, I SMS my Catholic friend who claimed to be an agnostic and asked him of his opinion on learning that the hardliner Ratzinger was the new Pope.

His answer was it does not make a different. When I insisted that it does make a great different to people like me who sympathise with pro-choice group on the abortion rights issue and support gay rights. His answer was 'it is too high a topic for me; I leave it to the Council of the Cardinals and the Bishops to deliberate.' A typical catholic answer I had expected, so it does not really surprise me.

The first and only GA of the UUA that I attended till date was held at Charlotte North Carolina, I landed at the airport and while looking for a shuttle to convey me to the Convention Centre, I met an American Indian (from Hyderabad) who is a Muslim and work as a ground staff of the Airline I traveled. I seek his help to locate the shuttle stop, but as usual the conversation does not stop there he asked me the reason of my visiting US of A and asked more about Unitarian Universalism. On meeting one of his female colleagues he introduced me as his fellow Indian and a person who has a belief that is similar to his own (one God). Pat came, the answer from his colleague. 'You can call yourself a Muslim here (Charlotte) but in New York you are a Terrorist.' When I look back, I can not

believe that this incident occurred 19938 years before 9/11. A Muslim is not only identify from his Namaz or the way he keep his beard, but his feeling of brotherhood among fellow Muslims and also his willing to take extreme step for the sake of what he consider to be 'a jihad.'

I now think that we UU the World over, we too have something unique that easily identify us from the rest. It reminds me of the joke that does the round few years back which goes like this 'If you want to make the Hindus angry you burn the AUM sign in their front, and if you want the Christian angry burnt the cross but what if you want to make the UU angry? Burn the question mark. Apart from questioning before we believe, we do have something else in common. Yes some of us we may share the Flaming chalice as the symbol of our faith, yet some may not, some may worship in a Church and some may meditate in the Chapel. Some may even say that we are indeed a bunch of complicate folks, having equally confusing beliefs, but to me we are like a garden of variety of flowers, different in colours, shapes and size and each having his own uniqueness. Each tries to retain its own uniqueness while growing in the same garden and sharing the same sunlight, land and water, and above all living in co-existence with one another and trying not stepping on other toes.

Recently Rev. P.G.Marbaniang related to me Dr. David R. Syiemlieh's remark on H.K.Singh's reason for founding of Unitarian Church in the Khasi Jaintia Hills as more of 'following his conscience than splitting from the main church' (Speech at the Anniversary Celebration of Unitarian Church Laban on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 2005). I think Dr. Syiemlieh hits the bull's eye and I personally think if there is anything that we have in common it is the 'following ones own conscience' approach that all the UU agrees. In other words if there is any authority that we owe our allegiance too, it is not the 25 Beacon street or the Essex Hall, the Unitarian Union Office or for that matter the ICUU headquarter, the seat of authority that UU owes their allegiance to is in the heart and soul of every human. For so long we have been ardent followers of our own conscience, we feel at ease with ourselves, we have no conflict what so ever between our inner-self and our day to day life, what ever we think, say or do we obey the dictate of our conscience, so we can say we live a satisfactory life. Every night we get a good and sound sleep that recharge and empower us for the entire task the new day requires. We have a peace of mind so to say.

On a second though, don't you think that this is too individualistic, too selfish or may I say too vested interest? We UU tend to be too self-centered. May be it is part of our belief that we tend not interfere with whatever other people think or belief, we took shelter in our so called 'respect for others opinion, faith, belief and understanding.' We don' feel the need to advocate hard for what we believe, or advocate hard enough against those who oppose stem cell research, we oppose the move to introduce creation by intelligent design in school syllabus as

oppose to Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest (creation by natural selection) but, we don't go beyond that. We can not deny the fact that when we contact people and enquire of their opinion on abortion right, gay right, creation issue in the school syllabus and host of other issue that we stand for, people sympathise with us and indeed share similar opinion with us, but why are we still considered to be a minority voice crying in the wilderness?

In the Khasi Unitarian context, H.K.Singh on following his conscience he was against all form of superstitions. One can imagine the 1880 Khasi society when the Welsh has just arrived in the hills and began to write the Bible in Khasi and start teaching people to write in their own lingua franca using Roman script. H.K.Singh's hymns depict his ardent vociferous call against worshipping gods and goddesses. Then another aspect of it was the advent of Christianity which teaches people to do away with the essence of real Christianity as taught by Jesus. His Unitarianism was therefore the product derived from his struggle against these two extreme teachings that of worshipping gods and goddesses and Christianity which are poles apart and equally superstitious in their right.

Unitarian Universalist is also a movement of people who un-ceasing struggle against conservatism, fundamentalism, bigotry and intolerance where ever it may be or in what ever shape, size or form it may appear. Unitarian Universalism is the liberals' reaction to the prevailing ills in the society, the Telegraph India (N.E. edition) on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October carried a story in which the headlines say "Bible Not All True: Catholic Church." After reading the report my remarked to a UU friend was 'Now that they have accepted the fallibility of the Bible, the war is won and there is no more battle to fight.' Is it?

One battle may be won, but the war is far from over, fundamentalism bigotry still raises its ugly head every now and then in many places in various forms, shape or size. The call for the UU is to follow ones conscience fight against the new form of fundamentalism, orthodoxy, intolerance and bigotry. We can not effort to be complacent and lay back minding our own business. It is about time that we get out of our own small pond, stand up ant shout out loud for the people to hear us. We need to be more vocal in our approach and tell the World with confidence what we stand for rather than keeping it to ourselves. It's a time to reach out to the masses, even though they might not like to join our church, but the important thing is to reach out to them and let them know what we stand for and may be they will lend their support. Although I hate to use the term war, but the war never ends for the liberals, we may win some battles here and there but Intolerance, orthodoxy, fundamentalism, bigotry will continue in new forms, shape or sizes, it is for us to reach out for the new horizon every time we win one.

