

absolutize any particular culture or particular moment of history, especially the present structures or latest panaceas. (3) It will be especially devoted to stories of justice done, the best source of light for our future though our times be not just like any other but genuinely new. (4) It will judge itself by the social order it generates, from nearest at hand—in the religious community and family—to all those larger—the marketplace, the state, the world.

I end with a (slightly adapted) reading from Isaiah 51:

Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
to the quarry from which you were dug;
look to your father Abraham
and to Sarah who gave you birth.
When I called them, they were but two.
I blessed them and made them many.
The Divine has indeed comforted Zion,
comforted all her ruined homes . . .
Pay heed to me, O my people;
for my law shall shine forth
and I will flash the light of my judgment
over the nations.
My victory is *near*, my deliverance has gone forth
and my power shall order the nations.

Shalom.

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Mosher

Guardians and Transformers: Toward a Rabbinical Understanding of Ministry

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Our Context: An Increased Demand for Ministry

The congregations in the Canadian part of our bi-national district have a reputation, deserved or not, for anti-clericalism. Certainly the picture of our district six or seven years ago demonstrated that the majority of our ministers were serving in the U.S. portion. Some congregations in Ontario and Quebec had chosen lay leadership after bad experiences with ministers. Others were of the opinion that their community's resources, both current and potential, were too small to support a minister. Together these attitudes added up to twenty-four congregations with only five ministers working in the region (two in Ottawa, one in Montreal, one in Toronto, one in Olinda).

About five years ago, the attitude began to change. An extension minister was settled in London, a parish minister was called to South Peel as an experiment. Now London shares a regularly settled minister with Waterloo, South Peel has confirmed its decision to operate with ministerial leadership, and an extension minister has been called to serve Hamilton and St. Catherines. Inconclusive conversations on the desirability of calling a minister are taking place

at Don Heights, and in a possible triad of Kingston, Belleville and Peterborough. Regardless of the outcome of those conversations, it is clear that our Canadian societies are expressing a greater interest in professional religious leadership.

In my own experience, which I am sure is echoed by colleagues, our smaller congregations are "minister hungry." South Peel makes my time available one Sunday per month to visit other congregations; my calendar is always full six months to one year in advance, and for the last four years I have had to turn down congregations because there simply weren't enough free weekends. While some of my popularity can be chalked up to my excellent speaking skills (he said, swallowing his humility), it remains true that these congregations have asked me specifically because I am a minister. Other ministers experience similar requests for their time. Our lay-led congregations have come to recognize the benefits of inviting a minister to speak, and I contend these benefits have some implications for our conception of the role of ordained ministry in our religious movement.

When I am invited to speak to a lay-led Unitarian Universalist congregation, it is usually in my role as a professional Unitarian Universalist. Usually I am requested for a sermon on some aspect of Unitarian Universalism—history, theology, social ethics. Always it is expected that I will speak to something from a Unitarian Universalist point of view. I, as a minister, more than anyone can be counted on for two things: I speak in public and I know our faith. Since I am employed full time as a minister I am by definition a professional Unitarian Universalist.

Our lay-led congregations' demand for a professional Unitarian Universalist is not limited to the worship service alone. I have found in fellowship after fellowship that time was requested informally for counselling. It seemed for a while that only people who had something they wanted to discuss with a minister ever volunteered to billet the visiting cleric. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that these people did not want for available counselling; Family Service Associations were active in every one of their communities. I was being asked for counsel, support, that could be relied upon to be sympathetic with Unitarian Universalist values. They wanted someone who could understand them from our religious perspective, yet who stood apart from the community of their congregation. Inviting the minister to stay in their home provided an opportunity to look deeply, more intimately, at the daily work of religion in their lives. I was expected to be a professional Unitarian Universalist.

Our Background: The Priesthood of All Believers

Our lay-led congregations by necessity embody, some better than others, our traditional principle of the priesthood of all believers. Whether chosen out of principle, because of negative experience or perceived lack of resources, their choice to take on the full responsibility of a religious community gives one kind of institutional form to the idea that you don't have to have an ordained leader to have a religious society. In the five years I have been in this district, I have watched them as they organized to meet needs which some might assume were the responsibility of clergy: chaplains for rites of passage, Committees of Concern for pastoral care, trained leaders for worship. Our district programs have been most helpful in this regard. The lay-led congregations demonstrate that the work of the church is the work of the people.

The priesthood of all believers is the context in which all of us conduct our ministries, lay and ordained. Unitarian Universalists have traditionally affirmed the priesthood of all believers because of at least four aspects of our religious value system.

—We believe the holy is present to everyone, and requires no human conduit to come into the lives of worshippers; therefore we eschew the theurgic image of priest as vehicle for God.

—We believe religion is best served in covenanted communities of freely gathered individuals, democratically governed; therefore we reject the episcopal image of priest as monarch of the church.

—We believe the people of the religious community have a responsibility to care for each other; therefore it is not the duty of the ordained leader alone to bring comfort to the suffering.

—We believe religious people have a responsibility to speak and act in the world for compassion and justice; therefore we reject the idea that the ordained leader alone should be an activist.

Searching Out the Role of the Ordained Minister

In seminary, and especially at ordination ceremonies, we hear a great deal about the four P's of ministry—the four roles our ministers are expected to play. I contend that all four roles are not unique to the parish ministry, but are in fact the responsibility of the entire congregation, ordained and lay. The four P's are the roles of:

preacher: yet our laity frequently speak deeply of their faith;
pastor: yet our laity care deeply and well for each other;

prophet: yet our laity too speak critically of injustice, and organize in the interests of social equity; and

priest: yet our laity can and do lead worship; lay chaplains officiate at rites of passage; and all of us facilitate the coming of truth into the world.

Such a similarity of function raises the questions of where the difference lies between clergy and laity. The difference, it has been said, between ordained and lay ministry in Unitarian Universalism is simply a matter of who gets paid for it, and so does it full time, for a living, and who does it as a hobby. We are all Unitarian Universalists; when we put "Rev." in front of our names, we are only become professional Unitarian Universalists.

I reject such a reduction of the role of the ordained minister to simply a matter of time and source of income. There is another set of needs which gives rise to the new popularity of ordained ministers in our district. The image of ordained ministry which articulates this need is neither priest, prophet, pastor nor preacher; nor is it the parson, the guru or the shaman, though sometimes they have held some fascination for us. The parson—pre-eminent person of the community in early New England—no longer exists; clergy have not the power we held then, nor the authority over the moral lives of our parishioners. Secondly, the word "parson" is now tainted with images of ineffectual moralism. Both the guru and the shaman come from spiritual disciplines foreign to us. Unitarian Universalists will generally not give themselves over to a master as the guru model requires, nor, in a religious tradition which emphasizes spiritual autonomy, should they. The role of the shaman is based on a metaphysics we don't share; if a Unitarian Universalist minister went into a trance during worship half the congregation would walk out and someone would call an ambulance.

All these models are of limited help as we struggle to define our evolving profession. They tell us more about who we aren't than about who we are. But I believe there is a model much closer at hand and much more useful: the Jewish rabbi.

The House Next Door Is Much Like Ours

The tradition of the rabbi contains a role definition of great value to Unitarian Universalists, although at first it might be difficult to distinguish. In North America, the rabbi has come to resemble the Protestant clergy to a great extent, and according to one study, the Unitarian Universalist clergy most of all. The Central Committee

of American Rabbis, the Reform professional organization, did a study in 1972 of rabbis and their congregations expectations and role contentments.¹ The descriptions of what a rabbi does and is expected to do will look familiar to any Unitarian Universalist minister. A 1980 study of 47 denominations regarding the expectations both clergy and laity had of the ministry linked Reform Judaism and Unitarian Universalism into one statistical category because they found identical concepts of the ministry in the two denominations.² Unfortunately, both the Reform Jewish and Unitarian Universalist samples were too small to be statistically analyzed on their own; the report is more useful in distinguishing these two groups from mainline and evangelical Christians. Reform Jews and Unitarian Universalists stood out in areas of theology where both Reform Judaism and Unitarian Universalism differ from the Christian tradition. Our jobs are as alike as any, and more like each other than religious leadership in any other religious tradition.

Like the Unitarian Universalist minister, the rabbi is not strictly necessary to the functioning of the congregation. A rabbi does not mediate the relationship between God and the worshipper, unlike the priests of the more sacramental forms of Christianity. Public worship can be held whenever a minyan can be gathered; a priest is not necessary. The rabbi, like the Unitarian Universalist minister, has an advisory and executive role in the governing of the synagogue; unlike the Roman Catholic priest, the rabbi is no autocrat. The rabbi does not preside over board meetings, unlike the minister in the United Church of Canada. Jewish tradition maintains that the congregation shares responsibility for care for the ill and bereaved; the rabbi's role as pastoral care provider has emerged in North America in part by Jews coming to share expectations of their Protestant neighbors.

So what are rabbis for? A Jew will turn to the rabbi for education and counsel, particularly regarding Judaism as a religious tradition. Rabbis are the professional Jews in their congregation, just as ministers are professional Unitarian Universalists. They share the religious obligations of their congregants; they do not take special vows of obligation. Rather their specialty is to know, protect, transmit and transform the unique religious insights embodied in Judaism.

The rabbis have developed this role through a long evolutionary history. Jewish history, in fact, has made this rabbinical role a necessity, and eliminated other styles of religious leadership—such as the temple priesthood and the charismatic messiah—as options. Even where other styles have developed, they have been branches off the

main trunk, interesting backwaters off the mainstream. Mainstream Judaism developed the modern rabbinate slowly, evolving an office of professional religious leader continually adapted to its moment in history.

Some Images from History

The work "rabbi" has its origins in the Hebrew word for "my teacher." In its oldest form, it contains a connotation of the guru-disciple relationship I rejected a moment ago. There is a sense of "mastery" in the term; the rabbi is one who has mastered the religious traditions of Judaism beyond the level of the student.

The use of "rabbi" as a title begins in about the first century C.E., and indicated first those authoritative teachers of Jewish tradition during the compilation of the Talmud—a period when Israel had to adapt itself to being a subject people in its own land, under the pressure of the dominant Hellenistic culture, and at the same time a people in diaspora. The rabbis emerged among the Pharisaic party, whose concept of "oral law" allowed them greater flexibility than the Sadducees, who based their claim to aristocratic authority on the plain word of written Torah alone. After the Bar Kochba revolt made it clear the Temple would not soon be rebuilt, the Pharisees were able to formulate a basis for Jewish life out of institutions that remained: the synagogue, Biblical writings, the mikvah, and their growing rabbinic tradition. According to historian Alan F. Segal:

Again and again the Pharisaic movement challenged the simple word of Scripture in an attempt to make the laws of Scripture more applicable to their own day.³ . . . They essentially tailored a primitive code of the tenth through the fifth centuries B.C.E. to the Hellenistic world by operating as if the Torah's ostensible meaning was but a pathway to the more relevant contemporary meaning, while claiming that they were actually unlocking its true meaning. . . . Sadducean principles probably coincided more closely with the popular Hellenism of Israel and hence were an earlier accommodation to Hellenistic life. But the Pharisaic scriptural interpretation rather than the Sadducean practice turned out to be the more effective accommodation and achieved wider acceptance because it did not appear to differ from or contravene the Torah, the root metaphor of the society.⁴

In its historic origins, rabbinism demonstrated its key qualities: the duty to preserve and transform the tradition to the times and situations of the Jewish people, thereby preserving their common identity.

Later the term "rabbi" came to signify those scholars skilled in Torah and Talmud who were recognized by older authorities as qualified to render judgment in matters of Jewish law. Ordination was received at the hands of the master with whom one studies in the presence of two other qualified authorities. A custom of "who is ordained may ordain" prevailed until modern times. Thus, the rabbinate became the guardian of Jewish tradition as well as its adaptor: as history progressed and other Jewish institutions disappeared, the rabbis remained, a self-perpetuating fellowship preserving and adapting Jewish tradition to the needs of subsequent ages.

The role evolved over time, and Judaism evolved with it. Until the Middle Ages, the rabbinate was not a paid profession. Custom decreed that study of Torah was the obligation of every Jewish male, and therefore no one should be paid for it. Until the fifteenth century the rabbis received high honour in the community for their teaching, but no salary. Yet the Middle Ages themselves had so added to the bulk of the rabbinical literature that law codes which organized Torah and Talmud into livable compendiums, such as the Shulchan Aruch, became necessary; the tradition grew. The rabbi as teacher in the community became valuable and provided for the continued transformation of the tradition.

Such transformation has continued throughout the history of the rabbinate. The Enlightenment left its mark on Judaism through the work of Moses Mendelsohn; a modernization of Judaism coincided with the liberal Christian origins of our own faith. A hundred years later, the Reform movement emerged to bring Judaism a modern face. The major documents of Reform identity are articulated by Rabbis in convention; in North America, through the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Even the Reform movement has not stood still, adapting itself continually to the modern situation.

In the twentieth century two other branches of Judaism came to birth, both through rabbi rethinking the position of Jews in the contemporary world. The first, Reconstructionism, so resembles Unitarian Universalism that the same joke is told about them as us: we both pray, you see, "To whom it may concern." Reconstructionism developed in response to a manifesto written by a rabbi: Mordecai Kaplan's *Judaism as a Civilization*.⁵ Kaplan urged a movement away from the Reform tendency to see Judaism as only a

religion; he urged an understanding of Judaism as a culture, which contained but was not limited to religious expressions. Finally, in the last few decades, a humanist Judaism has emerged under the leadership of Rabbi Sherman Wine.

In all these transformations, the rabbis were not creating new religion out of nothing; they were weaving together the thread of the tradition and the contemporary experience of the people of their communities. The rabbis took the problems of Jewish existence in a hostile world and articulated the means by which Jewish identity could be maintained. I do not mean to diminish the role of the Jewish laity; they, after all, lived the lives which posed the problems the rabbis were called upon to solve. The rabbis were responsible for synthesizing, articulating and preserving the religious culture of the people. In so doing they contributed greatly to the survival of the Jews as a people when the odds were against them: in all the ages when they have faced anti-Semitism, modernity and secularism.

A people's heritage does not belong to its leaders alone. It is the property of all who claim identity with the community. Neither are the religious leaders solely responsible for the preservation and transformation of the heritage; it is preserved and transformed in the everyday living of it. Through its long history, the people Israel have developed the rabbinate with the specific charge of being expert in the tradition, teaching the tradition, and guiding the community in facing the challenges to the tradition, challenges as diverse as the anti-Semitism of the Spanish Inquisition, the emancipation of Jews into full citizenship, the response to the horrors of the Holocaust, and the rise of the secular society. The role of the rabbi is a vital adaptation to the facts of Jewish history and has been critical to the survival of the Jews as a people.

A Rabbinate for Unitarian Universalists

Over the last two hundred years Unitarian Universalists have come to recognize that ours is a unique, evolving religious tradition. Channing and Martineau saw themselves as liberal Christians, and only with the rise of the free religious movement and religious humanism did our spiritual tradition enlarge upon its Christian beginnings. As I read our history, I see successive generations reaching for a purer, more reformed, more modern religion. Yet in our churches today we teach an identity, a history, a claiming of tradition which unites Michael Servetus with Margaret Fuller, Francis David with Frances Power Cobbe, John Sigismund with John Hayes

Holmes. Teaching Unitarian Universalist identity in our church schools has been in part a teaching of heroes and heroines, a recovering of ancestors who—like the bodies buried in Major-General Stanley's newly purchased yard⁶—came with the property when we became Unitarian Universalists.

A Jew is a Jew almost always by birth; a Unitarian Universalist is one by adult conversion. Even our minority of birth-right Unitarian Universalists must reclaim their identity by adhering to the community as adults. Ironically, it is precisely for this reason that we need ministers who function like rabbis: who are guardians and transformers of the religious tradition. Our people do not know their heritage when they first link up with us; like the youngest child at the Seder, they come to flower communion and ask, "Why is this morning unlike other mornings? On most mornings, only one person brings flowers for the altar; why on this morning does everyone bring a flower?" Our congregations need ministers who know who we are as a religious people, who can communicate it to the world, yes, but most importantly to our own members.

The current cultural climate requires of religious people that they be strong in their articulation of their religious values. Belonging to a religious community at all is to be apologetic and at once alienated from the secular mass culture. It is to find yourself having to explain, often, why you bother, when religion is no longer a matter of social coercion. Ironically, discourse on social issues increasingly concerns religious topics, ranging from liberation theology to the right to terminate pregnancy. For religion, these are the best of times and the worst of times.

The irony that in these secular times religious discourse is on the public agenda is related to the demand among our laity for more services from ministers. Liberal religious people are required now, more than before, to articulate just why it is they are Unitarian Universalists; for that they need more training than most lay led congregations can provide. We cannot now afford to be lax in our proclamation of our unique religious identity; we are under too much threat.

These are not easy times to be Unitarian Universalists. The increasingly secular society has meant we can no longer count on the disaffected of other faiths to flock to our doors; the world has less need of decompression chambers for fallen fundamentalists. The mainline churches have occupied the corner we once thought we had on the market of social responsibility, and they are better at it. The religious right wing claims total possession of the property and accuses us of being no religion at all. And still—and most

importantly—an abiding hunger gnaws at the spirits of those who long for an authentic spiritual home but do not imagine that we exist. We are under attack, and at the same time, there is great need for us. The job before us is immense and our numbers are few.

The rabbinate was evolved by Jews during times when their very identity was under attack, when Jews were in danger of going out of existence. Whether the threat was the attractions of Hellenistic culture, the Spanish Inquisition or the rise of secularism, the rabbis have articulated ways of being Jewish in the world of their day. Such a job, I believe, is being demanded of Unitarian Universalist ministers. The call of the times is for us to be guardians of the heritage and transformers of the tradition.

Why This is Important: The Rabbinical Function of Ministers

If rabbis have found that they function much like Protestant clergy and if studies show them to be functioning like Unitarian Universalist clergy in particular, then why am I talking about this as if it were news? I believe a rabbinical understanding of our function as Unitarian Universalist ministers is useful in two ways: it can deliver an organizing principle to the diversity of things a minister does, first; and secondly, the diaspora nature of Unitarian Universalist existence makes a rabbinate very useful for preserving and enhancing Unitarian Universalist identity.

No one has a more diverse job than the parish clergy. We preach, we teach, we prophesy, we pastor, we counsel, we advise, we administer, and when we can find time, we are scholars. All of us can think of colleagues who, in our perception, put too much emphasis on one or another aspect of the job; and if we are honest with ourselves, we will recognize that we can easily get trapped in one or two of them and neglect the others. Ministers have differing strengths, skills and interests; some aspects of the job will be more comfortable to us than others. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking of our job in its parts, and getting stuck in one part or the other.

What holds together all these variable activities? What have they in common? They all are involved in the extension and transformation of our religion in the lives of the people who call us to be their ministers. When we are engaged in doing what ministers do, we are standing at a particular crossroads, where the religious values of Unitarian Universalism meet the lives of today's people. Unitarian Universalists seek from their professional religious leaders not smooth

talk, not psychiatric expertise, not deft sociological analysis, not super-efficient administration. Rather they are seeking someone who knows our faith and its principles and traditions and can help transform it into a living reality for them. They seek not priests, not prophets, not parsons, but rabbis.

Why This is Important: Our Diaspora

Like the Jews, Unitarian Universalists live in a kind of diaspora. We have no Eretz Israel, no place where ours is the dominant culture, where Unitarian Universalist values, customs, traditions are the norm. Even in the cities where we have several congregations, our churches draw their membership from across a wide area; ours are not neighborhood churches and we do not live in ghettos. We are always a minority, even in the lands where our faith first arose. Hence we depend on our gathered communities, our "houses of assembly", as institutions which reinforce our identity, our heritage, and most importantly our values. Even those congregations are frequently the only ones in their geographic areas; we are the only religious movement I know which commonly identifies its congregations with the names of the cities where they are found and no other name.

A diaspora existence requires the reinforcement of common identity. The need for that reinforcement is increased when the community is under threat. One response to that need has been the increased demand for ordained ministry—and the increased interest in it. We have more students studying for the ministry now than at any time in our history. (Mazel tov to us!) The times are provoking a change—and a call, I believe, for a "rabbinical" ministry.

Appendix: A Question of Authority

One implication of this "rabbinical" model of ministry is that the source of authority for the Unitarian Universalist minister is in the mastery of our religious heritage. This might seem to contradict our custom of congregational ordination. Rabbis, as I said above, are ordained by other rabbis; in fact, in North American practice, they are ordained by the seminaries which train them. Embodied in this tradition is the recognition that the rabbi's authority comes in his or her understanding of Torah and Talmud and that recognition is best made by those who have that authority themselves. The authority of the rabbi is earned in study. (British Unitarian practice closely resembles this.)

Yet the rabbi is also the employee of the congregation in the same way our Canadian ministers are. A rabbi is hired by a congregation to serve their needs and fired by them if he or she fails to do so. The congregation also, then, empowers the rabbi, endows her or him with authority, through the hiring process. In essence, rabbinical authority is endowed not only in the act of ordination but in the ongoing (and often tumultuous) relationship between rabbi and congregation.

So is it with us. We ordain congregationally; we expect congregations—bodies of lay people—to be the organs which recognize and appoint the separate order of ministry. Even so, we also organize a denominational Ministerial Fellowship Committee, composed of both clergy and laity, which is empowered to supervise the training in our “Torah and Talmud,” the skills our congregations require in ministry. So while it might appear that a rabbinical model of ministry challenges the principle of congregational ordination, we, like the Jews have recognized that ministerial authority is recognized two ways: in the mastery of the traditions and the relationship to the congregation.

Footnotes

1. Theodore I. Lenn, *Rabbi and Synagogue in Reform Judaism*. Central Committee of American Rabbis, 1972.
2. David S. Schuler, Merton P. Strommen, and Milo L. Brekke, editors, *Ministry in America: A Report and Analysis, Based on an In-Depth Survey of 47 Denominations in the United States and Canada, with an Interpretation by 18 Experts*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.
3. Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 122.
4. Segal, *Ibid.*, p. 123.
5. Mordecai Kaplan, *Judaism as a Civilization*. New York: Schocken Books, 1967.

6. The opening of the second act of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance* shows Major-General Stanley (“The very model of the modern major-general. . .”) apologizing to the “ancestors” buried in the chapel yard of his estate, for he has besmirched the family honour by lying to the pirates. He has told the pirates that like them, he is an orphan, and therefore they will not harm him. Another character asks the Major-General why he is apologizing to these tombstones, for they aren't his ancestors at all—he only bought the property a fortnight ago. They are in fact his ancestors, Stanley replies, because they came with the property when he bought it. My thanks to Chris Raible for this useful analogy.