

Power, Money, and Cultural Dominance

A few weeks ago, I was in my study reading excerpts from Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed's classic *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*. My partner walked by and seeing the title of the book said something like "Pioneers? That's frontier language, settler-colonial language." Being me, I was a bit annoyed at the walk-by critique...and in it was the clear reminder that language matters. Language is not ahistorical or apolitical. The words we choose are loaded with meaning that sometimes transcend our present and harken back to pasts that are imbued with violence and horrors.

Admittedly, I have little critique of Rev. Morrison-Reed's use of the word "pioneer" since I appreciate the spirit in which he selected the word. But, my partner reminded me that we cannot always know the impact of our well-intentioned decisions especially since the world, culture itself, is not static. It is ever changing, and we ought to be in the business of actively learning. There are many ways of staying engaged in the project of learning: one way is to always be attending to the voices of those who are pushed to the margins; listening to and trusting the experiences of those who have been oppressed due to (settler) colonization, imperialism, and the forces of racism, white supremacy, patriarchy etc. that are often embedded in western imperialism.

In defining imperialism, Fred, in session one, said: Imperialism is "a way of seeing the world from a position of power and acting accordingly. It's only conceivable in a context of unequal relationships." (Anna Su, *Exporting Freedom: Religious Liberty and American power*, p. 5) and from this, he outlined the ways in which Unitarian players shaped our relationship with the Philippines that was based on the very foundation of unequal power and western domination.

How am I using the term "imperialism" especially as it relates to contemporary North American Unitarian Universalism? Language matters, and my colleague Sara always reminds me that the very act of saying "Unitarian Universalism" is, itself, somewhat hostile for it places us, North Americans, at the center and renders invisible the Unitarian, Unitarian Universalist, and General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches who exist beyond our geographic borders. To call us only "Unitarian Universalists" asserts a kind of cultural imperial dominance (and ethnocentrism) as we are claiming the power to name the faith, and in that naming, we are subtly defining its parameters. Truly, we see the world only as we understand the world, which is through our limitations and position of power and that is apparent in how we refer to (or not) those who share our faith.

Deeper than that, however, must be the recognition that within North America, it's difficult to escape the reality that white settlers [actively supported](#) missionary activities within indigenous communities, converting and suppressing indigenous practices – and perpetrating incredible

harm. This is, in fact, religious imperialism that was baked into the laws / policies of the U.S...all in the quest for land, resources, and power.

As UUs we have been the beneficiaries of this within the U.S. – it is, in part, why we do land acknowledgement, which can be a powerful step AND it doesn't negate the fact that our (non-native) existence and accumulation of resources rests on the subjugation of indigenous peoples.

Specific to the UUA, we possess an enormous footprint, and as a result we knowingly, or unknowingly, influence and shape what it means to be Unitarian/Universalist. We do this with our printed materials, our organizational infrastructure, our internet presence, our relationship with UU seminaries, our finances – and the power that we hold because of those finances – and our size. In a small religious movement, we (the UUA) are quite large! We can bend and shape and mold what it means to live this faith. We actually embody a soft form of [cultural imperialism](#).

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Article II of our bylaws begin with: *We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person ...*¹and even so, there is an unspoken expectation that U/Us beyond our geographic borders make sense of our principles which, per our Bylaws, are particular only to us – members of the UUA.

The first principle, while one of my favorites, betrays our love affair with the individual as being supreme² over the community...especially when coupled with the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” These can be understood as culturally bound forms of expression that make sense within the context of white, middle to upper class, community within the United States. They don't necessarily translate – nor should they – to a global context...especially within communities that are communally oriented in nature. These principles can be said to also reflect American anxieties about [religious freedom](#) – a legacy from the 18th century.

How do we make sense of our influence in a globally connected world while also being cognizant of the reality that we do hold power and we need to use that power responsibly?

How do we use our resources in ways that allow us to live into and from the values we espouse?

¹ Think: Is it a stretch to say that the Principles and Purposes are examples of cultural hegemony? In that it is the UUA's version of what it means to UU – via the principles – that has been adopted, not uniformly, but frequently.

² It is worth noting that the [original language of 1961](#) was more direct in preferencing the individual over the community. The Principles [adopted in 1985](#) are meant to be a corrective.

Scenario #1

Dear Unitarian Universalist Association:

My name is Father John T. Brathwaite and I'm the pastor of one of our large Anglican congregations in Grenada. I'm writing to you today because my personal study has led me to discover that I am a Unitarian Universalist. After my many years of training to serve the Anglican Church, I realize now that my faith resonates far more deeply with your teachings and theological views.

I've read Channing, and more, and I affirm this belief in a just God, a single God, and in your concern that reason, intellect, and tolerance be integral to matters of faith. This isn't to say that I find my current denomination without these three anchors, and it stands to reason that a God who is love, who is infinitely good will not seek to damn us but rather, be far more generous and just in His dealings with we who are imperfect humans.

A small – and growing – group of us meet each week to worship in the Unitarian way. We light a candle at the start of each service and sing songs of celebration usually from our canon of calypsos. The singing of calypsos may be unorthodox and after years of following a prescribed liturgy, I am grateful for the freedom to be energized and inspired by our local music. I am also energized by bringing to our sacred Christian scripture, curiosity, a critical eye – and an open heart.

Now I am writing to you because we would like to join the Unitarian Universalist Association. Additionally, I believe that it is my calling to be a Unitarian Universalist minister and share the good news of this faith in Grenada and perhaps even the wider Caribbean. I seek your support in transferring my ordination to your faith and engaging in an additional study needed to lead a congregation here on my island or in the United States. Also, we imagine asking for your support to build a new Unitarian Universalist church here once I am a Unitarian Universalist minister. We are eager to share this faith.

Having inherited the Church of England's religion – and with it, centuries of colonial ghosts – my group and I feel ready to seek our freedom and faith elsewhere. We believe that within America, you are different and an example of what true brotherhood could be. Thus, even though we denounce America's fairly recent invasion of Grenada, the faith values you uphold lead us to believe that we can be a part of your family.

In Faith,
Father John T. Brathwaite

Context:

It's 1985, you're on staff at the UUA and you've received this letter. You bring it to your International Engagement staff team to discuss. You'll need to make recommendations to the President regarding how to respond and proceed. You're aware that there is a desire to grow the faith but it's unclear what that means or should mean.

Scenario #2

Pastor Jane has served a mid-sized congregation in the middle of the country for almost nine years. In that time, she has seen the congregation grow and develop a powerful sense of who they are to the community. They've been good partners to the LGBTQI organizations in town, taken the lead on political organizing around issues relating to equitable education and poverty, and they are faithful companions to BIPOC organizations working for transformation at a local level.

In the time that she has served the congregation, they've learned how to be good comrades rather than always needing to take the lead, they've learned when to follow and when to use their resources to amplify and influence. In every way, she feels herself lucky to do such powerful ministry with them.

The congregants are mainly middle to lower middle socio-economic status and in a college town, many of them are connected to the University and/or Community College in some way. Once in a while, she wishes that they could be more racially and ethnically diverse and have more young people. She knows that they long for this as well.

On an otherwise ordinary morning, while Pastor Jane was in her study reviewing the budget, she received a call from a lawyer claiming to represent a family that she was fairly certain she had never heard of. The lawyer explained that *"no, the deceased was not a Unitarian Universalist, nor did she have connection to UU-ism. She simply had a lot of money and was somewhat eccentric."* This, the lawyer explained, is probably why she left 75% of her estate to the congregation in a trust with very specific parameters.

Two weeks later, after meeting with the legal team for the deceased, Pastor Jane realized that the congregation was 10 million dollars richer thanks to a donor they didn't know and never heard of before that moment. She also realized that the funds would always exist as it was a perpetual trust. The challenge facing them was that the trust stipulated that they use:

50% of its income to support "orphans and abandoned children in Africa,"

25% of the trust's income to be used to support "innovation projects in impoverished African villages"

12% must be used to work with the University and supporting "assimilation" initiatives for non-white international students

13% of the trust's income can be used at the congregation's discretion to support charitable organizations to include covering congregational operational costs incurred in that support work.

Pastor Jane was stunned and perplexed. The congregation was solidly mid-western with no ties to Africa – heck, Africa isn't exactly small or a country. She had no idea where to begin. Back in her study, the phone kept ringing. Already the Board members had divergent ideas: they could make UU-ism global and do so much good! Pastor Jane was skeptical, and she felt very much like the options were few.

Context:

Pastor Jane cannot refuse this trust fund. She did think of that and it's not a possibility. She must figure out how to live within the bounds of trust while not betraying the ethics and values she holds. She is also aware that the congregation is facing a significant deficit that has only grown in her time there.

The Board of 9 is at odds about how to proceed. Six members are convinced that to be good stewards, they ought to simply follow the stipulations of the Trust. Two board members are clear that to do so is to replicate questionable NGO practices in a geographic region where they currently have no connections. One board member is interested in learning if there are ways to find loopholes in the language of the trust and use it in such a way that it reflects their values.