The Weekend Essay Life & Arts

The culture wars dividing America's most liberal church

Long a beacon of progressive values, Unitarian Universalism has been convulsed by pulpit politics

Jemima Kelly 18 HOURS AGO

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The Reverend Todd Eklof is an amateur ventriloquist, a social justice activist, a father and an atheist. He is also at the heart of a struggle for the future of America's most liberal church.

At around lunchtime on Friday 21 June 2019, the third day of the annual general assembly (GA) of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in Spokane, Washington state, Eklof began handing out a book of three essays he'd spent the previous 10 months working on: *The Gadfly Papers*.

Unitarian Universalism, a religious movement with some 150,000 members across the US, has long been considered a beacon of progressivism, pluralism and tolerance. But in these essays, Eklof launched a stinging attack on its leadership, arguing that the UUA was driving the church in an illiberal, dogmatic, intolerant and "identitarian" direction and that it had become a "self-perpetuating echo chamber" that prioritised "emotional thinking" over logic and reason.

Borrowing from some of the arguments laid out in Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff's book *The Coddling of the American Mind,* Eklof described several instances in which he believed the UUA had veered too far into political correctness and emotional "safetyism".

One example he cited was when, after publishing an article in its magazine by a woman whose daughter had a trans girlfriend on the importance of congregations being inclusive of trans people, its president issued a public apology for failing to realise that "a story told from a cisgender perspective would cause harm". Another was when the church's "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign was changed to "Side with Love" because it might be offensive to those who cannot stand.

Aware that the book was likely to cause a stir,

'Why are Unitarian Universalists so bad at singing hymns?' goes one joke. 'Because they're always reading ahead to see if they agree with the lyrics!'

he had waited until the conference was almost over before handing it out. "I thought if I gave it away on the Wednesday, there might be all kinds of chaos," says Eklof, a tall, teddy-bearish man of 59. We are sitting at his kitchen table in Spokane with his wife Peggy and rescue dog Wiley, a dead ringer for Scooby-Doo. "I knew enough at this point to know people would go online and go crazy and so I thought: 'I would rather them do that when they're home than when they're here in Spokane.'"

Around 9pm that evening, he was called by the co-moderator of the GA and asked to attend a meeting at 7am the next morning to discuss "the disruption and harm" his book was causing. "My instinct was: 'I don't work for these people and I am not going to give them my power,'" Eklof tells me. So he said no. The co-moderator told him, politely, that was just fine, but he would not be allowed to return to the GA.

A welcome sign outside the Unitarian church in Lancaster, Massachusetts © Alamy

"I hung up the phone and I said to Peggy, 'I think we've just won. The GA can't get away with banning a minister for giving away a book — all hell is going to break loose,'" says Eklof. "And that's what's happened over a period of years, as more and more people continue to become aware of what's going on."

The chaos and controversy that ensued has surpassed even Eklof's wildest imaginings, and serves as a kind of microcosm of the way the culture wars can divide even the most politically liberal members of American society. Because the struggle in the Unitarian Universalist church is not one between progressives and conservatives; it is between people on the same side of the political spectrum. "Why are UUs so bad at singing hymns?" goes one of the (many) jokes about Unitarian Universalism. "Because they're always reading ahead to see if they agree with the lyrics!"

A life-long Democrat, Eklof was fired from a job in 2005 after speaking out in favour of gay marriage. He also wrote in *The Gadfly Papers* that America remains a "systematically white supremacist country". But since the book's publication, he has been accused of racism, homophobia, ableism and bullying; he has been dropped from a mentoring position at a theological school; and "disfellowshipped" — in effect, excommunicated — from the church. The UUA says this is because he "refused to participate in the process of reviewing concerns and complaints"; Eklof says the process was rigged.

Eklof is still minister of the main UU church in Spokane — the UU church's system of

"congregational polity" means that each church is self-governing and so chooses its own leaders. But the so-called Gadfly affair has — along with the impact of Covid — lost him about a quarter of his now 300-strong congregation, so last year he took a 25 per cent pay cut, to $75,000. And Eklof has become so disillusioned by the church's leadership that earlier this year he set up a new association that some believe might end up splitting the church in two.

Unitarian Universalism is a distinctly American religion. Formed in 1961, when the American Unitarian Association merged with the Universalist Church of America — both have roots in the Christian faith — the modern UU church has no formal connection to Christianity. In fact, it has no prescribed dogma at all: it welcomes those from all faiths, and those with no religious faith at all. Not only can an atheist join the UU church; they can also become one of its ministers. "Deeds not creeds," goes one of its taglines. "We need not think alike to love alike," goes another.

But Eklof was concerned that this principle was being abandoned. "I thought freedom of conscience and freedom of speech was our thing," he wrote in his preface. "But as the essays I've written herein will show, not so much anymore."

The Unitarian Universalist church in Spokane, Washington state © Margaret Albaugh

The Spokane church's announcements board © Margaret Albaugh

On Saturday 22 June 2019, the church ministers' association's People of Color and Indigenous Chapter issued a public statement. It cited no passages from the book, but said "the material in question lacks both respect and compassion", and called on "white colleagues to resist confusion and renew their dedication to the work of decentering white supremacy".

The UU has a history of being ahead of its time. In 1970 it called for marijuana to be legalised. In 1979 it ordained its first openly gay minister

The same day, a statement that would eventually be signed by 485 white UU ministers was duly issued. "We recognise that a zealous commitment to 'logic' and 'reason' over all other forms of knowing is one of the foundational stones of White Supremacy Culture," they wrote.

The UU church, whose membership is overwhelmingly white, middle-class and highly educated, has a long history of social justice activism. In the 19th century, Unitarians fought for the abolition of slavery, women's rights and penal reform. During the 1960s, the newly merged church was heavily involved in the civil rights movement; one minister was murdered by white supremacists for his involvement in

the protests in Selma, Alabama.

The church also has a history of being ahead of its time. In 1970, it passed a "general resolution" calling for the legalisation of marijuana. The same year, it became the first church to officially condemn discrimination on the grounds of sexuality, ordaining its first openly gay minister in 1979, and its first openly transgender minister in 1988. It ordained its first female African-American minister in 1981: Yvonne Seon, a poet and professor who is also the mother of the comedian Dave Chappelle.

Arlington Street Church in Boston, Massachusetts, in March 1965, where a service was held for Unitarian Universalist minister, James Reeb, murdered in Selma © Associated Press

And at the end of the 1990s, Unitarian Universalism once again appeared to be ahead of the pack by embracing a new approach that was gaining ground in progressive academic circles: anti-racist theory. At its 1997 general assembly, the UUA passed a resolution to set up a "Journey Towards Wholeness" task force, whose report recommended that their congregations "participate in anti-racism and anti-oppression programming" in order to collectively become "an anti-racist multicultural institution".

But not everyone was on board with this new movement. Some people felt that while it might look like liberalism, it was actually rooted in a completely different analysis of the world and that this was in effect a new kind of dogma — in a movement that was

meant to have no such thing. With no creed to follow, the church seemed to be instead embracing what the African-American academic John McWhorter, in his bestselling book *Woke Racism* — which cites Eklof and the Gadfly affair — has called "a new religion".

One of the people concerned about this new direction was Reverend Thandeka — a name given to her by the late Desmond Tutu at a dinner party in 1984, meaning "beloved" in Xhosa. She would later become one of 62 ministers who signed a letter expressing concern at Eklof's treatment.

"His book isn't perfect, since no book is," Thandeka, now 77, tells me over video from her home near Boston, Massachusetts (where the UU church is headquartered). "Todd uses a different set of terms than I do, which is part of what it means to be part of a non-credal liberal faith tradition. But . . . Todd is not a racist."

Thandeka, a prominent African-American UU minister and theologian, gave an address at the 1999 general assembly entitled "Why anti-racism will fail", criticising the UUA's programme. She argued it made "an erroneous assumption about the nature and structure of power in America" and that by encouraging white people to "confess their racism", anti-racism teachers were in fact having the counter-productive effect of creating "whites who have learned to think of themselves as racists".

"It had actually stepped backward into a theology that this liberal faith tradition rejected: the Christian doctrine of original sin," she tells me. But senior members of the church quickly turned against her after this. "I was kicked off committees, I was told this was an 'attempt to accrue power'," she says. "I was told I was ignoring the way in which whites are just guilty guilty guilty, of original sin, of racism — I was attacked." Was this, I ask, by white people or black people? "Well, since 99 per cent of the association was white . . . " she breaks into laughter.

That the church is so overwhelmingly white and wealthy has always clashed with its view of itself as progressive, Peter Morales — who served as the first Latino president of the UUA, between 2009 and 2017 — tells me. A 2014 Pew Research survey found that only 1 per cent of its members were black, more than a third had graduate degrees, and more than two-fifths had a household income of $100,000 or more.

Reverend Thandeka was one of 62 ministers who voiced concern at Eklof's treatment

Peter Morales, the UUA's first Latino president, later accused of 'male white privilege'

"One of the tensions in Unitarian Universalism is that it desires a level of racial and ethnic diversity that it doesn't have. Morales became a very fashionable surname," he tells me with a smile, at his home in the sleepy, lavender-filled town of Sequim, in northwestern Washington state. "If you are black or Latino, you get overwhelmed with requests: will you serve on this committee? Will you represent us here?"

Morales, also now 77, had a mixed view of the "tokenism" he perceived around him. On the one hand, he didn't like people's assumption that he was a "diversity hire"; on the other, he was grateful for all the opportunities he was getting. And he made increasing ethnic diversity a priority during his presidency, with some success: he says that under his leadership, the proportion of people of colour working for the UUA increased from 14 to 20 per cent, and from 5 per cent to 9 per cent at the managerial level.

But in March 2017, just three months before Morales's second and final term was due to end, a controversy broke out over a hiring decision, when a white man was chosen to replace another white man as the leader of the Southern Region of the UUA over a Latina woman. A furore broke out on social media, with the woman claiming in a blog post that "it is his unearned white male privilege that made him the 'right fit' over me".

Morales wrote to staff, urging them to show "more humility and less self righteousness, more thoughtfulness and less hysteria". But that just made things worse. "It wasn't well received — it never occurred to me that 'hysteria' would be seen as an attack against women," he tells me. Three days later, he stood down as president. "It's a soap opera and there are a lot of dead bodies," he says.

Morales's ousting provided the opportunity for the progressive movement that had been building in the church since the late 1990s to consolidate its power. Three African-American interim presidents were appointed to take Morales's place; a board

of trustees was commissioned to "analyse structural racism" and "make recommendations for systemic change"; and just after the general assembly that year, the church's "white supremacy culture" was denounced by its leaders on National Public Radio.

The following year, the UUA's own Beacon Press — known for publishing the likes of James Baldwin and Martin Luther King Jr — put out a book that would become a bestseller in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in 2020: *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo, arguing that white hypersensitivity to charges of racism is part of what underpins racial discrimination in America.

One of the most vocal opponents of Eklof and his allies has been Reverend Sarah Skochko, a 39-year-old mother with a masters in poetry who gave a sermon in October 2019 to her congregation in Eugene, Oregon, calling Eklof's book "morally reprehensible". She describes "the Gadflies" as an "alt-right movement" within the church made up of "overwhelmingly retired", "mostly white men" who are "trying to stop the justice work of our denomination" and who disingenuously present themselves as "either victims of an inquisition, or as valiant heretics fighting for free speech".

Reverend Sarah Skochko, one of Eklof's most vocal opponents © Jennifer James Long

Skochko doesn't buy into the idea that the UUA is veering into illiberalism. "I've only heard the word 'illiberal' used by people who aren't getting their own way," she tells me. "In my opinion [Eklof] intended on getting disfellowshipped all along, as a publicity stunt," she adds. "His decreasing relevance bothers him."

Although she has previously written that "Gadflyism", as she calls it, "is tearing apart our churches", she plays down to me the idea that there might be any kind of schism developing in the church. "There's one main grouping, and then there's a smattering of malcontents," she tells me.

Not every congregation is even aware that this struggle is going on, and among those who are, not everyone wants to become entangled in it. "There are people who are just letting *The Jerry Springer Show* play out, are like, 'Yes and?'" Reverend Vanessa Rush Southern tells me in her airy office in the First Unitarian Universalist Society of San Francisco, whose early members included the essayist and abolitionist Ralph Waldo Emerson.

'I've only heard the word 'illiberal' used by people who aren't getting their own way'

Southern defends the direction that the UUA is going in, though she does acknowledge that it doesn't always get everything right. "Like all moments of growth there is a frameshift that happens and there is a degree to which some of that can end up being a bit clumsy," she says. "But I'm not going to be in a conversation that's about tearing one another apart for the sake of drama. We are wrestling with how to be in the world and to whom we need to be most accountable. Change is messy. And, meanwhile, I have a city to minister to."

In the 59 years between the formation of the UU church in 1961 and 2020, nine ministers were permanently disfellowshipped, seven of whom were expelled for reasons related to sexual misconduct or the possession of child pornography. In the three years since 2020, five ministers, including Eklof, have been disfellowshipped —

for much less serious transgressions.

I ask Carey McDonald, UUA executive vice-president, why this might be. "I would say we've started taking concerns and complaints more seriously in the dozen years that I've worked at the UUA," he tells me. "We've improved and enhanced our processes." McDonald also tells me that any changes in the church's direction made by the UUA "are determined democratically by our delegates and elected leaders" at each year's general assembly, and so "the officers of the association like myself cannot make decisions on behalf of our congregations".

At this year's general assembly in Pittsburgh attendees were required to wear masks at all times and asked to wear a coloured sticker to demonstrate their "personal comfort level with safe distancing". They were also encouraged to introduce themselves with their pronouns, a "land acknowledgment" — explaining which part of the US they were from and which indigenous group lived on the land before them — and a visual description of themselves for anyone who was visually impaired.

LGBT+ activists on the Motor City Pride parade in Detroit this June. A group from the Unitarian Universalist church carry a 'Side with Love' banner © Alamy

But while some attendees felt this was over the top and performative, they are used to this at the GA. What many were more concerned about was a proposed change to the UUA's bylaws that they believe will push the church further into illiberalism: over 86

per cent of delegates voted in favour of an amendment to the "Article II" clause that will need just two-thirds approval to be voted through at next year's GA. This change would scrap the "principles" that have existed in some form since the merged church was founded in 1961 (there are now seven after an extra one, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part", was added in 1985).

These would be replaced with a set of "values" represented by a flower pattern, with a chalice and the word "LOVE" at the centre and six petals representing the new values. These include a new commitment to "dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression", and a change of wording in the very first principle of Unitarian Universalism. While the old principle said the "inherent worth and dignity of every person" should be affirmed and promoted, the new value says that "every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness" — a subtle but significant change in the language, critics say.

McDonald tells me that the church's bylaws require it to reconsider and re-evaluate the "core language of [its] faith community" every 15 years, and that change is part of the "living tradition" of the church. He also points out that there is much continuity in the new values. But opposition is strong, and at least two groups have been set up to fight the proposed amendment. Save The 7 Principles is one; the 5th Principle Project another.

Sandra Diaz, who works for the UU church in Boone, North Carolina, on a women's march in 2019

One of those who attended this year's GA and voted against the amendment to Article II is Sandra Diaz, who works as the office manager at the UU church in Boone, North Carolina. Diaz, who tells me she is "pretty lefty radical" and organises Black Lives Matter protests, felt that the UUA was not allowing for sufficient critical discussion of the proposed amendment, and so voted against it "as a protest vote".

"There were so many official representatives wearing the supposedly 'unofficial' image of the new principles, but supposedly we were still in the process of deciding," she says. "I felt so much cognitive dissonance, and wondered if I was being gaslighted."

She was even more dismayed when she saw the image on the official card she received from the UUA for this year's "Thanksgrieving" — a term Unitarian Universalists use instead of Thanksgiving because the latter serves as "a reminder of the genocide of millions of Native people". The card "made it seem like the new bylaws are a done deal and if you don't go along with it, you're standing in the way", she says.

Like most religions, the UU church is shrinking, and from a low base: it had 974 congregations at last count and, aware of this, Eklof says he is not aiming to split it into two even smaller religions. But in March, Eklof officially launched a new Unitarian Universalist body: the North American Unitarian Association, which now has more than 700 individual members and four member congregations.

"The NAUA is satisfying my needs for liberal community," he tells me. "We do the things for ourselves that we expect the UUA to do but that it is no longer doing: providing an open-minded community that allows people with different beliefs and backgrounds to live together peacefully. That's really what we're recreating."

The NAUA is adding about two more members every day, Eklof tells me, holds its own services and education sessions, and has its own monthly newsletter. And not only is it now planning its first general assembly; it is talking with Unitarian churches in other countries about creating a global association.

"I don't really see it as a rival organisation," Eklof says. "What I see it as is a necessary

organisation."

Jemima Kelly is an FT columnist

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