

## Bill Breeden as Theologian

Bill Breeden understands himself to be a pacifist, a socialist, a universalist, and an agnostic. I cannot recall that he has ever said anything from the pulpit or in private conversation that would contradict this self-description.

In this essay I wish to focus on what I take to be the primarily theological dimensions of his self-understanding, as evidenced primarily in his preaching and public discourse, namely his universalism and his agnosticism. Yet, because Bill regards himself as an agnostic, it may seem oxymoronic to speak of his theology! Theology, after all, most simply and literally means “God-talk.” Does he even have a theology? Is it even fair to Bill to attempt to characterize his thought in such terms? Besides, Bill is so thoroughly engaged in other forms of expression of ministry, theology may almost seem like a sideline.

But Bill is a preacher, and theology in some form or other is necessarily part of his stock in trade. Moreover, he has a clearly well-honed outlook on life and the world, a *Weltanschauung* or worldview, that merits close attention. However others may answer the question of whether Bill has a theology, I am going to proceed on the basis of my conviction that his preaching possesses both theological intimations and implications, and that these are worthy of our serious consideration.

As another contributor to this volume has most aptly observed, Bill believes that no one is damned, but that everyone needs to be saved. On numerous occasions he has made it clear that he is a universalist with respect to the ultimate destiny of every human being. He may remain agnostic about that destiny, but he clearly expresses a hopefulness, even optimism, suggesting that, whatever lies beyond this life, it is all to the good.

Do not get me wrong. I don't think Bill spends a lot of time worrying about the next life. Nor does his preaching have much if anything to say about the hereafter. Bill is very much concerned about the here-and-now. Nonetheless, and perhaps inescapably given Bill's upbringing in a religious milieu in which getting saved to secure one's eternal destiny figured rather prominently, I think Bill's outlook on life is profoundly shaped by his seemingly inchoate sense that it matters where the whole cosmic enterprise is ultimately headed.

Does that mean that he believes in an afterlife? Beats me. I think he wants to believe in what may be precisely termed subjective immortality, or the enduring and presumably everlasting perdurance of individual personal identity. From my own perspective, it is unthinkable that human beings might endure as subjects to one another beyond their temporal existence without the existence of a Supreme Being, or God. On the other hand, I find no grounds for believing that such a life after death is necessarily entailed by the existence of an Ultimate Divine Reality. Personally, I remain agnostic about any personal life hereafter, and regard most affirmations regarding this prospect to be wishful thinking.

As already intimated, I suspect that Bill's thoughts about life after death are deeply influenced by his upbringing in a family and congregation of the Church of the Nazarene. However, it is also endemic in our larger culture to believe in some sort of life after death. Moreover, many UUs

evidently hold to such belief, and since Bill must relate to them as pastor on a regular basis, it would be quite unreasonable to suppose that Bill is impervious to their expectations and beliefs. On the other hand, Bill's thoughts about life after death are surely also related to, and perhaps even derivative of, a truly fundamental conviction he has about the goodness of human life and, indeed, the goodness of existence – whether viewed as creation or merely evolutionary process – as a whole.

Bill has explicitly and repeatedly related his universalism to his first experience as a father. The birth of his first child was, for him, a profoundly theological event. The beauty and innocence that he beheld in the advent and presence of his child impressed upon him how unthinkable it would be, first, to see this child as one born into sin and somehow needing divine redemption, and second, to regard as worthy of human worship any God who would impose such a condition of sin upon such a child. Such a God would be a monster, and certainly not a God of love. I cannot recall Bill ever speaking explicitly of having any conversion experience, but the way he has related the experience of the birth of his first child suggests that this may have been such.<sup>1</sup>

Speaking of love, for Bill there is no more powerful reality in the universe. Love is the definitive touchstone of all human existence. If there is a God, that God must be love.<sup>2</sup> But whether there is a God or not, Bill speaks with conviction that love is the one thing that ultimately matters, and – hopefully – will ultimately triumph. Hence, whether or not he is strictly a Unitarian, in the traditional sense of believing in one God, he is altogether Universalist in his belief that every human being is deserving of love, and that love must therefore be determinative regarding the conduct of all human affairs as well as the ultimate outcome of all human existence.

But Bill is also a great believer in, and advocate of, justice. Perhaps nothing has more centrally defined his ministry than his commitment to social justice. Bill sees that the world is filled with horrible injustices, and he believes that he and everyone else are called to make this world a better place. Injustice is, of course, a particular word for sin, a word that Bill will occasionally invoke, usually with an aside to the effect that UU's don't like to talk about sin – may not even believe in it. But there it is. Because the world is filled with injustice, and no doubt also because human beings are subject to other failings, it may be said that Bill believes everyone needs to be saved.. They do not need to be saved from original sin, however, nor do they need to be saved from the wrath of God or any other sort of divine judgment. They need to be saved from themselves.

People need to believe in themselves. They need to claim what is good and beautiful and just within them, intrinsic to their very being. They need to act with compassion, against fear, with hope, with conviction that what they are capable of doing can and will make a positive difference.

I am unable to discern what Bill thinks will be the final outcome of the human enterprise if human beings fail to meet the challenges that injustice presents. He does reflect on the possibility that the human species may join the ranks of the extinct. He certainly has warned us of nuclear disaster and of the possibilities of ecological suicide. He certainly recognizes that for all too many people, including some he has known personally, such as those who sit on death row in the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, life may end tragically, without evidence of redemption. I think he harbors hope, however, that even they may ultimately be redeemed. This suggests, again, that he

does not regard this temporal existence as the be-all and end-all of individual human existence. Although he has surely contemplated the demise of the human species, I'm not sure Bill's optimism permits him fully to pursue the theological implications of the prospect that the whole human enterprise may turn out to be a colossal failure.

Which brings me to where I find myself in clearest disagreement with Bill. I do not believe that humankind can save itself. I believe that, apart from divine Grace, we are doomed.<sup>3</sup> Bill sometimes speaks of grace, by which he at least means gift, but I am unsure what else he means, since he more often and more clearly avers that he is an agnostic who does not know, nor seem to consider it essential to decide, whether a benevolent God somehow presides over the cosmos.

Bill's universalism is entirely compatible, in my view, with a theology of divine benevolence. But his agnosticism and what I take to be his hopeful optimism stand in some tension with his convictions about the need for love and justice to save the world from itself. Can we transcend ourselves? Can we rise above our self-preoccupations on our own? I think Bill would say we must, or maybe there is a God who can help us to do so, but since we don't know about such things, we've got to give it whatever we can. To paraphrase Bill, we've got to love our way out of the mess we are in. If we fail, it is clear that Bill thinks it will be because our brains are too big and our hearts are too small.

As a former parish minister, I must confess that while serving as a pastor there were always certain matters that got short shrift, including intellectual matters that might have led me to places that would have complicated my relationship with my congregation and denomination. I now have more clearly defined convictions about certain matters that would have made it difficult if not impossible to continue as a parish minister in my congregation at the time if I had come to those convictions at that time. Strong and intimate human relationships invariably shape our perceptions and our thoughts about life and the world, irrespective of what disinterested parties might judge the realities to be, and I don't think we would want it any other way. For good or ill, it must surely be the case for many UU ministers these days that the makeup of UU congregations mitigates against the pursuit and acceptance of many strong and particular theological convictions, especially strong theistic convictions, even though that is hardly where Unitarianism began.

Somewhere along the way, probably late in his seminary education, Bill encountered the theology of Paul Tillich. It obviously left a deep impression. Tillich's metaphor for the supreme reality, the "ground of being," and his metaphor for the religious dimension of human existence, our "ultimate concern," still resonate with Bill. I think Bill would translate these metaphors into something like this: Our ultimate concern is whatever we most love, and love itself is the ground of our being. He would not attempt to provide any philosophical defense for these assertions. Rather, he would point to his own and other's lived experiences, and would claim that these reveal, above all, the centrality of love.

I wonder what Bill would say to the question, Is love precisely another word for God – or the divine? If he were to say yes, then it may be that he is really not an agnostic, just someone who doesn't find the word God very useful any more. I can heartily appreciate such a sentiment, since

there may be no word in any language that is more frequently taken in vain.

If memory serves, Bill recently captured the negative side of theistic belief when he offered his counter to the well-known saying, “If there is no God, all is permitted.” Bill rejoined, “If there is a God, all is permitted.” His point was that every sort of heinous human behavior has been, and continues to be, undertaken in the name of God. No argument here. However, the rhetorical power of this observation does not obviate the truth of the original proposition. Nor is it necessarily the case that belief in God leads to human depravities. So much depends on how the Ultimate is conceptualized and how adherents elaborate their understanding of what it means to be faithful to, or in allegiance with, this Ultimate.

Now if Bill were to say no to my question about whether love is precisely another word for God, then I would press him to justify his conviction regarding the centrality and surpassing reality of love. It is hardly obvious to me, nor I suspect is it clear to most people on the planet, that love is the dominant reality, the force that will ultimately triumph over all adversity, with respect to the human enterprise. The horrific wars and genocides of the past 100 years present a strong *prima facie* case against that conclusion.

And, in a more philosophical vein, I would ask Bill if he has any thoughts about the origin of such love as governs our very existence. Where does it come from? Is it inherent in all things? Was it present at the Big Bang — if indeed there ever was a Big Bang? Is it intrinsic to the tooth and claw existence of biological evolution? What is there to vouchsafe that this homage to love is more than a delusionist addiction to a post-modern romanticism?

There is in fact very little in Bill’s theology with which I can take serious exception. I share his universalism, his rejection of many hoary orthodoxies like original sin, his sense that love and justice are indispensable human virtues and values without which we are in the sorriest condition. I am not quite a pacifist or a socialist, but Bill’s quasi-theological critiques of violence and war, corporate capitalism, and our so-called criminal justice system generally strike me as right on the mark. And I can only stand in admiration of his capacity to draw upon his personal experience and that of those with whom and to whom he has ministered over the years to make vivid and powerful the theological claims that he is eager to make.

I am well into my seventh decade, and there is no preacher I have heard on a regular basis to whom I would rather listen, or with whom I agree more, than Bill Breeden. I will greatly miss his absence from the pulpit of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington. Bill has often thanked me when I have engaged him, and sometimes differed with him, regarding some point he has made or some issue he has raised. Any reservations I have about Bill’s theology probably arise from my sense that there may be more that it is necessary to think through, to believe, and to say, in order to be convincing not only at an affective but also at a cognitive level. I trust that Bill will neither be devastated nor offended by the questions and reservations I have posed here for his consideration and that of all who read these essays.

1. Bill has reported that he has titled his forthcoming memoir *Billy Pilgrim and the Black Female Jesus*, the latter a reference to a poverty-stricken black woman he encountered in Nashville, Tennessee. This encounter may in fact be Bill’s most significant conversion experience, but I have not yet heard him speak of it in detail.

2. In his sermon, "To the Seventh Generation," preached on 9-29-2002, Bill declared, "I have told you before that I believe one can insert the word "Love" in place of the word "God" in the scriptures of nearly any religion and do quite well in establishing principles of personal and social transformation. Indeed, when I find references to God in which the substitution of Love renders the reference non-sensical or oxymoronic, then I simply assert that this is no God of mine." In the context in which these words appear it is quite clear that Bill does not intend to be making a theistic claim. In other words, whatever he means by "Love," he is not saying that Love possesses the ontological status of God.

3. It is commonplace in monotheistic theology to regard the presence of evil as a, if not the, major conundrum. The explicit assumption is that God is supremely good and all-powerful, so why does evil persist? My own take on this question turns it on its head. Given the intractable and irrefutable experiential and existential reality of the presence and persistence of evil, how is goodness to be accounted for? This is a deepening of the question, Why is there something and not nothing? It is the question, Why do we continue to exist, and to experience goodness, love, truth, justice, and compassion, in spite of all that is destructive and subject to perishing and death? Or, as I have already implied, How is it that we are saved from ourselves?

*Copyright 2014 by Byron C. Bangert*