

OCTOBER MONTHLY THEME:  
LIBERALISM—RIGHTS, FREEDOMS, AND RESPONSIBILITIES

*Liberalism:*  
*Dictionary.com*

- 1) *The holding of liberal views*
- 2) *A political philosophy based on belief in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, and the autonomy of the individual and standing for the protection of political and civil liberties*
- 3) *A movement in modern Protestantism that emphasizes freedom from tradition and authority, the adjustment of religious beliefs to scientific conceptions, and the development of spiritual capacities.*

Liberalism has been lauded (or critiqued) for its focus on individual rights and freedoms. However, it is also a tradition that emerges out of the reality of living in groups with conflicting points of view. In this sense, Liberalism is a theory about how to value individual freedoms while also living together in groups. As a congregation that emerges out of the Liberal religious tradition, our monthly theme wrestles with these questions of what it means to live together when we disagree. How do we negotiate competing claims between individuals and groups? How do we reconcile freedom of belief with commitments to equity and our connections to each other in a web of life? What are our responsibilities as participants in Liberal institutions?

**Which question is calling to you? Where is it leading you?**

1. How do you define the term Liberalism? Do you identify as a Liberal—politically? religiously?
2. Do you primarily experience freedom as a freedom *for* actions/beliefs or a freedom *from* restraints?
3. What enables you to be civil with someone with whom you disagree?
4. Before dying, Spiderman’s uncle tells him that with great power comes great responsibility. In what ways have you found freedom and responsibility to be connected?
5. Which responsibilities do you feel emerge from your freedoms? Which do you find it easier to act on? Which do you find more difficult to act on?
6. What does it mean to you that Unitarian Universalism, a liberal religion, promotes the “free and responsible search for truth and meaning”?

**Wise Words:**

By definition a liberal is a man who believes in liberty.

*Maurice Cranston*

Liberalism is realistic about the huge task of remaking worlds. But it is romantic about the possibility of making marginally happier endings for as many as possible within this one.

*Adam Gopnik*

Liberalism...means celebrating and practicing the importance of persons: their inherent freedom to think, speak, associate, hear, read, see, and learn; not perfect freedom, but responsible freedom, become manifest in the particulars of our lives. *Jack Mendelsohn*

In the face of disagreements, liberals tried to maintain open minds and to believe in the possibility and desirability of progress—moral progress, human progress and social progress dependent on each individual's growth in conversation with other individuals, rather than in opposition to them, in a society that rises together if it is to rise at all.

*Amy Kittelstrom on the 18<sup>th</sup> century U.S.*

We can disagree and still love each other unless your disagreement is rooted in my oppression and denial of my humanity and right to exist. *James Baldwin*

The investigation of the rights of the slave has led me to a better understanding of my own. I have found the anti-slavery cause to be ... the school in which human rights are more fully investigated and better understood and taught than in any other. *Angelina Grimke*

First, individual rights cannot be sacrificed for the sake of the general good, and second, the principles of justice that specify these rights cannot be premised on any particular vision of the good life. What justifies the rights is not that they maximize the general welfare or otherwise promote the good, but rather that they comprise a fair framework within which individuals and groups can choose their own values and ends, consistent with a similar liberty for others.

*Michael J. Sandel*

Of all the varieties of virtues, liberalism is the most beloved. *Aristotle*

It is important for this country to make its people so obsessed with their own liberal individualism that they do not have time to think about a world larger than self.

*bell hooks (with a critical tone)*

We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own. *Cesar Chavez*

When we struggle for human rights, for freedom, for dignity, when we feel that it is a ministry of the church to concern itself for those who are hungry, for those who have no schools, for those who are deprived, we are not departing from God's promise. He comes to free us from sin, and the church knows that sin's consequences are all such injustices and abuses. The church knows it is saving the world when it undertakes to speak also of such things.

*Bishop Oscar A. Romero*

Unitarian Universalists have come to trust and place great value on freedom and individualism. What we tend to forget is that they emphasized freedom in order to liberate themselves from bondage. Today our problem is not bondage, but bondlessness. Most of us are already free. We don't need more freedom. We need the resolve to employ the freedom we have responsibly. We need to invest a little of our precious freedom and bond ourselves to others in redemptive community. *Forrest Church*

A liberal is a man too broadminded to take his own side in a quarrel. *Robert Frost*

Religious liberalism starts with the premise that religion should be oriented toward the present, not the past, and that religious beliefs should be in tune with modern knowledge and experience. ... A second characteristic of religious liberalism is a commitment to free religious inquiry. For liberals, religious authority is based on individual reason and experience rather than external sources such as scripture or church.

*Paul Rasor*

While the Declaration of Rights was before the National Assembly some of its members remarked that if a declaration of rights were published it should be accompanied by a Declaration of Duties. The observation discovered a mind that reflected, and it only erred by not reflecting far enough. A Declaration of rights is, by reciprocity, a Declaration of Duties also. Whatever is my right as a man is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee as well as to possess.

*Thomas Paine*

A hero is someone who understands the responsibility that comes with his freedom.

*Bob Dylan*

We need to restore the full meaning of that old word, duty. It is the other side of rights.

*Pearl Buck*

Anger points powerfully to the denial of rights, but the exercise of rights can't live and thrive on anger. It lives and thrives on the dogged pursuit of justice.

*Ursula K. Le Guin*

### **Resources:**

- “Liberalism” explained by the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberalism/>
- Video: 3 Minute Theory: What is Neoliberalism? *A critical take on neoliberalism and its links to classical liberalism.* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzLv3rfnOVw>
- Video: Liberalism: Where did it come from and are its days numbered? *The Economist*
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KO8OxfiVv8>
- Video: “The Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism”, Sermon by the Rev. Leslie Takahashi
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjYOZCpeSQg>
- Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religions—link to original text: <https://sowhatfaith.com/2011/05/13/5-smooth-stones-of-liberal-religion/>

### **Books**

- *How to Love a Country, Poems* by Richard Blanco (2019)
- *A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism*, Adam Gopnik (2019)
- *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition*, Amy Kittlestrom (2015)
- *This America: The Case for the Nation*, Jill Lepore (2019)
- *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age: Why I am a Unitarian Universalist, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Jack Mendelsohn (1964, 1966, 1985, 1995, 2006)
- *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square*, Paul Rasor (2012)

### **Books for Kids**

- *Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up by Sitting Down*, Andrea Davis Pinkney
- *We March*, Shane W. Evans
- *Peaceful Fights for Equal Rights*, Rob Sanders