



## Long Term Damage When Ideology Defeats Ethical Principles

a review by Dick Burkhart of

### Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism

By Mark Morrison-Reed (2018)

This insightful work attempts to be a balanced history of how the Black Power movement created enormous controversy within the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in the late 1960s and early 70s. Yet more needs to be said about the lasting damage that reverberates to this day. I can only conclude that the combination of strong black identity, white guilt, and lack of historical perspective can be toxic, even in a religious association devoted to strong principles of ethical behavior. These days UUs even profess to be “(Standing) On the Side of Love”, but mostly toward certain favored groups, and from a liberal Unitarian middle class white perspective, overpowering the more working class and less racially conscious Universalist heritage.

Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed is a long serving and well regarded UU African American minister, yet the “balance” he seeks in this book is mostly a balance of “causes” – ideologies and interests – not an examination of how the UU principles were honored or abused in this instance. And I think this is symptomatic of the problems that have been magnified today in US society – that causes outweigh common ethics, basic principles, and historical perspective. As to the latter, it took 5 generations after the Civil War before Jim Crow was finally ended. Obviously MLK’s project of “integration” would take at least another couple of generations to fully take hold, even with the best leadership. But Morrison-Reed only cites the generations it has taken the feminist and LGBTQ movements to succeed, not possible obstacles to black empowerment or strategies to overcome likely hurdles.

Yet the Black Power activists, organized as the Black Affairs Council (BAC), were not interested in the hard, long, and frustrating generational work of realizing “equal rights”. When their revolutionary vision didn’t come to pass within few years, they turned to unsavory tactics and political theater that made a mockery of the treasured UU “democratic process” and respect for “the inherent worth and dignity and of each person”. As Morrison-Reed documents in great detail they adopted tactics explicitly designed to violate these principles, even to demonize the more moderate Black and White Action (BWA) group. This group had the backing of the Community Church of New York City, long the most integrated church in the UUA, far less susceptible to white guilt. Full disclosure: I have fond memories of Glover Barnes, the principle African American spokesperson for BWA, and later a fellow congregant and highly esteemed elder in the Rainier Valley UU Congregation in Seattle. I also knew another BWA activist, John Cornethan, an honored black elder at the nearby University Unitarian Church.

But it wasn’t just BWA and many traditional UUs leaders who had strong negative reactions to BAC tactics, such as non-negotiable demands, enforced by contrived walkouts and boycotts, instead of respectful dialogue and due process. Even the African American women behind the domineering BAC men tried, but failed, to bring them down to earth. While the BAC narrowly won funding votes at the General Assemblies of

1968 and 1969, thereafter they narrowly lost votes despite the strong justice orientation of most delegates, as the BAC tactics became more uncompromising and their attitudes more self-righteous.

At one point the sympathetic Veatch Fund stepped in to continue the BAC funding, which went to certain worthy black empowerment ventures across the country, but not to several successful black social development projects already underway, causing more divisions within the very small ranks of UU African Americans. By the mid 70s the funding ceased and the BAC fell apart, with many BAC leaders leaving Unitarian Universalism in anger, as the backlash spread. My own UU mother switched to the UCC around this time, seeking a more spiritual home, less political, even though she had been a key lay leader in 1968 in Tacoma, promoting better black / white relations.

So, yes, even though the cause was good, the damage was deep and long lasting. True, more people of color have appeared in visible UUA positions, such as the Presidency and the Ware Lectures, but the goal, now called diversity instead of integration, is still illusive. Meanwhile the UU leadership continues to lack historical and spiritual depth on these matters, as is painfully obvious to many of us who have lived diversity versus wishing for it. Instead of “wise elders” who step in to defend the UU principles and guide us toward more constructive outcomes, we’re experiencing a resurgence of racial ideologies, backed by white righteousness and guilt, producing a new black empowerment crisis in the UUA. The damage is already underway, most visibly in the resignation of the Hispanic UUA President, Rev. Peter Morales, in 2017, over a racially charged hiring controversy, and most recently with the censorship of Rev. Todd Eklof for distributing a book, “The Gadfly Papers”, promoting dialogue on some of these very issues.

Morrison-Reed does draw some useful lessons, such as “Hubris fuels tragedy; it does not lead to spiritual health” and “Once an adversarial model was embraced, sharing and willingness to be vulnerable ended”, concerning the BAC, “leaving all sides feeling misunderstood, and battered, victimized, and betrayed” (p. 346). Concerning the white allies, “because they tended to feel angry, impatient, and righteous, they were unsuited to the tasks of persuasion and conciliation that are fundamental to a covenantal faith. Their decisions and actions were ideologically, rather than spiritually grounded. What enlivened them was the feeling that they were on the side of the oppressed” (p. 347).

Yet 50 years later too few in the UUA leadership have learned these lessons, or they have been intimidated by accusations of racism / white supremacy, or they have succumbed to dysfunctional ideologies such as “white supremacy culture” and “white fragility”. And a key enabler hasn’t changed at all – the resurgence of white guilt – now due to Trump’s attacks on minorities and immigrants. Thus many UUs have fallen for Trump’s scapegoating instead of focusing on the plight of the white working class, which was the group most damaged by the escalating inequality of the last 40 years, many voting for Trump out of desperation. Even the white underclass is not viewed as “oppressed” as most minorities – all those “deaths of despair” (opioids, suicides, etc.) must be their own fault, at least that is what “white fragility” would teach us.

So Morrison-Reed certainly understands what happened, yet he doesn’t adopt some of this more explicit wording, presumably to avoid getting embroiled in today’s black empowerment controversy.