

## Theos, Logos, and LEGO: Building a Theology

Think about kids toys for a moment. Not just any kids toys, but the ones you can build stuff with. Think of the different sorts of construction sets there are: LEGO, Erector sets, Lincoln Logs, Tinker Toys. . .and on and on. Now, consider these sets each as a specific religion. Each teaches that only their set is valid for constructing a theology: If you're born a Southern Baptist, you must construct your theology out of, say, Lincoln Logs. Tinker Toys won't do. Don't even look over there at the people building with Tinker Toys. Or LEGO bricks. That won't do. Only Lincoln Logs contain the correct—the one true way—of building. And then imagine the Roman Catholic Church claiming the same thing about LEGO. Don't look over there at the Erector Set.

You see the point.

And just think about Lincoln Logs. You can build cabins and forts. You can even build, if you're so inclined, shopping malls and airplanes and space ships. But, come down to it, no matter what you build, it's always made of Lincoln Logs. Even space ships have a vague resemblance to log cabins.

Or take Tinker Toys. You can make great Ferris Wheels with Tinker Toys. And dogs and cats. Even shopping malls and space ships. But, end of the day. . .everything has a certain. . .roundness to it.

Or take LEGO. You can build pirate ships of LEGO. Space ships. Perhaps you've seen that someone has told the story of the Bible in LEGO. Perhaps, were you persistent, you could even build a HEART out of LEGO bricks. But, at the end of the day, it would still be a heart made of. . .LEGO bricks. There would be a certain. . .blockish quality to the heart.

LEGO has LEGO logic. Lincoln Logs have Lincoln Logs logic. That's the way it works.

(I do hope you'll forgive my ignorance of contemporary toys: I was born with Eisenhower was president and my kids are grown.)

But I'm not working with this metaphor to be silly. I think perhaps there's some truth to be got at here. If we say that Roman Catholics can only play with LEGO in their theology; that Southern Baptists can only play with Lincoln Logs; that Pentecostals can only play with Erector Sets, what we're saying is that there is an internal logic to the theologies built into the play sets. We're saying that Roman Catholicism will always—whatever the new idea—come up with a creation, a new toy, based on its preexisting logic.

Now look at Unitarian Universalism. We may be born playing with Lincoln Logs, but somewhere along the way get into Tinker Toys or Erector sets.

Sometimes a UU born into a LEGO theology converts utterly into the Tinker Toy camp.

More often, UUs take the collective approach: We build a garage out of Lincoln Logs, an elevator with an Erector set, a house out of LEGO bricks, and . . . whatever new, cool construction sets someone my age hasn't even heard of.

You get the point.

## Part 2

"Theo-ology."

Theos, as in "god."

"Ology" as in a branch of learning.

Learning. Thus we have bio-ology and soci-ology. We've even got bacteriology. Branches of learning.

And let's take bacteriology as an example. We can certainly HAVE bacteria without studying about it. It's natural; it's out there and we don't necessarily have to be experts to live quite well in the world with our bacteria.

And, indeed, theology can be in that category for many people. You don't you're your pneumatology from your sotierioligy? That's OK. Because in most faith traditions, you only need to defer to an expert, who will tell you what you think. And all you, as a true believer, have to say is, "Yeah! What he said!"

As a twelve year old in a Pentecostal church, I could answer every question of theology. I'd been taught all the answers.

So we can certainly learn, by rote, all the answers. So it appears that we can be taught a catechism of bacteriology.

But what about a "natural" response to bacteriology? One unencumbered by rote learning. . .

Now, were Ralph Waldo Emerson here this morning (and who's to say he's not?) he would most likely slap me upside the head and say, "You silly dolt! OF COURSE theology is EXACTLY like bacteriology: We humans have a natural capacity for understanding the divine and the spiritual in our lives."

But, I would say, after recovering from the violence, it isn't as simple as that, Ralph. Because, unlike the example of bacteriology, in the field of theology there is lots of *misinformation*, bad information, and just general chicanery.

Here's the difference: People don't argue their bacteriology; people don't chose their friends according to their bacteriology; people don't select supreme court justices according to their bacteriology. People don't kill each other over bacteriology.

And therein lays the difference.

A few years back UU minister Richard Gilbert wrote a curriculum called "Building Your Own Theology." It became a huge success for adult RE classes. And it caused a great deal of guffawing among ministers of other faith traditions. They saw building your own theology as roughly the same as building your own nuclear reactor in the basement. And at one level they were of course correct. Emerson to the contrary, theology is the very definition of a hide-bound discipline—walk into any seminary library and you will find literally hide-bound tomes crumbling away. And, by golly, every one of them is worth a read. Especially here in the Western world, we have spent HUGE amounts of human energy on theology.

Yet, were we to pull many of those jeering ministers aside and ask them, "But, do you REALLY believe every bit of the theology of your religious tradition?" many, if not most, would respond, "It's according to what you mean by 'believe'."

Because—back to Emerson—he was right in some very important ways.

In his "Divinity School Address," a speech to the graduating Unitarian ministry students at Harvard Divinity School, Emerson said,

Once leave your own knowledge of God, your own sentiment, and take secondary knowledge, as St. Paul's, or George Fox's, or Swedenborg's, and you get wide from God with every year this secondary form lasts, and if, as now, for centuries, --the chasm yawns to that breadth, that men can scarcely be convinced there is in them anything divine.

Let me admonish you, first of all, to go alone; to refuse the good models, even those which are sacred in the imagination of men, and dare to love God without mediator or veil. Friends enough you shall find who will hold up to your emulation Wesleys and Oberlins, Saints and Prophets. Thank God for these good men, but say, 'I also am a man.' Imitation cannot go above its model. The imitator dooms himself to hopeless mediocrity. The inventor did it, because it was natural to

him, and so in him it has a charm. In the imitator, something else is natural, and he bereaves himself of his own beauty, to come short of another man's.

Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost , -- cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity. Look to it first and only, that fashion, custom, authority, pleasure, and money, are nothing to you, -- are not bandages over your eyes, that you cannot see, -- but live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind.

. . .

For all our penny-wisdom, for all our soul-destroying slavery to habit, it is not to be doubted, that all men have sublime thoughts; that all men value the few real hours of life; they love to be heard; they love to be caught up into the vision of principles. We mark with light in the memory the few interviews we have had, in the dreary years of routine and of sin, with souls that made our souls wiser; that spoke what we thought; that told us what we knew; that gave us leave to be what we inly were. Discharge to men the priestly office, and, present or absent, you shall be followed with their love as by an angel.

Now, Emerson would be the first person to point out the contradiction of using an OLD TEXT—in this case his—to point out the weakness of old texts. Yet, theology and spirituality are full of such contradictions, and people since Emerson have not been quite so brave or so cogent in their thinking.

Our religious tradition honors the individual search for truth and meaning, and to our ears “building your own theology” sounds not like a joke, but like fun, sounds like something we ought to do. And, given that we believe in the interconnected web of all being, we know this all connects to something larger, something larger that we feel responsibility toward.

This is the difference between our religious tradition and many others. We take a look and consider the merits of LEGO and Tinker Toys for ourselves.

As I have mentioned, I was born into Pentecostal Christianity. That didn't work for me. I tried more liberal Protestant denominations. Those left something to be desired for me. Nowadays, I'm an inveterate reader of Liberal Christian theology and I pursue mystic Christian practices, such as Centering Prayer. Yet I also practice a combination of philosophical Taoist and Buddhist principles because I think those paths better address the problems of living a balanced life in the day-to-day.

So , I've constructed my personal theology out of several different sets. I think Lincoln Logs make great cabins but Tinker Toys or Erector sets make better Ferris Wheels. It's really that simple. And my Unitarian Universalist tradition teaches me that that is OK. I'm not going to be struck dead or damned to eternal torment because I don't play with my Lincoln Logs properly.

Our religious tradition tells me that ortho-praxis—the way of right DOING—is a better way than ortho-doxy—the way of right believing. It isn't that we believe people can believe "whatever," but rather that we believe each of us must find what we MUST believe.

## Conclusion

Which leads to my conclusion: a little discussion of our covenantal theology. That is, our agreements concerning how we will act together.

We practice covenantal theology in our tradition because we don't require people to BELIEVE what we believe. Since this is the case, our tradition practices the idea that we should agree how to treat each other. I think most of us would agree with the great Victorian John Ruskin who once said, "When a man is wrapped up in himself, he makes a pretty small package." That goes for women too.

In our tradition, we believe that it matters how people treat each other. Take a simple example: there would be, were we to bring up the subject, lots of disagreement about what a "sin" is. Or even if there is such a thing. BUT there would be little discussion about the "sin" of being a jerk. We simply don't think that being a jerk is acceptable.

We agree on ways that we will act together. The covenant of this congregation reads:

As a congregation:

We encourage children,

We preserve the environment,

We nurture spiritual enrichment,

We embrace authentic relationships,

We serve each other and the larger community.

This we covenant with each other.

Ortho-praxis rather than Ortho-doxy. This would not BE a Unitarian Universalist congregation without that central core.

So, today, we will have an opportunity to put our covenantal theology into practice, right after this service. We are going to construct a covenant between the congregation and the minister.

So, what's a covenant? The Hebrew Scriptures discuss covenant, and covenants are even older than that. Covenants posit a worldview, then describe the way people will be together. The Mayflower Compact of 1620 was a covenant. It's very old in our tradition.

A covenant contains promises concerning how we will act. And that commitment to work together has some responsibilities: if we agree that we will do thus-and-so, it's not good enough to get to the end of the covenant and say, "See! I knew it! I knew you'd never do thus-and-so!" The commitment is that we will be accountable to each other. If I'm not doing thus-and-so or you're not doing thus-and-so, our responsibility to each other is to say our truth long before it's over, long before it's too late. Our responsibility is to help—now—to realize our common goals. "I told you so!" is not acceptable in covenant. We enter into covenant for MUTUAL edification.

So, you see, covenant is NOT a contract. I have a contract for what is expected of me here at this church. It's a legal document. I sign it, the board signs it. Everybody has outs and loopholes and what-have-yous. That's the way the law is. But in covenants there are no loopholes, no outs. We agree to speak our minds and hold each other to a high standard of responsibility. We owe that to each other, because we have covenanted to hold three things in tension: the respect for the inherent worth and dignity of each person; the free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and the knowledge that we are all part of an interconnected web of all being.

So, let's covenant together. Let's share and explore our theologies. Let's get out of our own little boxes and get wrapped up in a much larger package.

So may it be.