

Organizational Structures and Theology

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Why is a particular church structured in a particular way?

In some religions like Roman Catholicism, there is a very defined and ordered structure. The Pope is at the top. Although he consults with others, all Catholics must defer to the Pope in matters of faith. They believe he was given this authority directly by Jesus. The Pope is the direct link to God. Below the Pope come the cardinals, bishops and priests, all of whom have a share of the Pope's power. For example, people can pray to God directly, but sacramental blessings and forgiveness come through the priests.

Judaism is very different. The Jews believe that each person can relate directly to God. They are all God's people. Their leaders are given the title Rabbi, which means teacher. Though respected, the rabbis have no special power to absolve sins or give special blessings. The rabbis don't make the major decisions in the community, the people do. Much of the Jewish religion is practiced at home. Many of the most important prayers and rituals happen when you are alone or at home.

These two different church structures suggest different theologies, different sets of beliefs about the role of human beings in relation to God and different roles for God. Jews feel they can talk to God and negotiate with Him. Catholics (and many other kinds of Christians) believe one must go through a religious leader to some degree.

In the Unitarian and Universalist world, there are several variations as well. Often our understanding of the divine and our relationship with God shapes church structure. But, it is also shaped by the political and social world in which it is practiced. These conditions can vary greatly around the world.

In Transylvania, where Unitarianism has existed for over 450 years, there is both freedom and structure. Each person is free to work out their own relationship with God. At the same time the administrative side of churches is governed by a Bishop and councils of lay people and ordained ministers. Ministers are ordained by the Bishop and often sent to specific congregations under the Bishop's authority. Among a people who have suffered under war and oppression of various kinds (including restrictions of the numbers of ministers they could ordain), the strong central authority has helped preserve the structures of the church, its buildings and traditions.

In the remote Khasi Hills of India, the founder of Unitarianism found spiritual and theological inspiration from the great 19th century American writers like Channing. He also borrowed elements from British Christian missionaries and mixed them with

existing tribal religious views. But the fact that there was little government or social structure where they lived caused these Unitarians to take on the role of providing some government, education and social services for their own people and for the non-Unitarian parts of the community as well. There are no ordained ministers. The church is primarily led by trained lay leaders called Church Visitors.

In North America (Canada and the United States), the arrival of Unitarian and Universalist ideas in the 1800s matched a growing desire for personal and political freedom. A generation before the United States won independence through revolution. In Canada that same independence would come through negotiation with Great Britain. In this new spirit of liberty, Unitarianism and Universalism adopted a democratic congregational model. This meant that no central church could tell them what to believe or how to run their churches. Like the Jews, each person had the right to work out their relationship with God without an agent standing in between.

In each country the church structure has been shaped by belief as well as by politics and social setting.

And yet, no matter what the structure, we all gather in communities to worship and do the work of our religion. We recognize that we are free to work out our beliefs. But we also need the community of others to help make sure those beliefs are reasonable. No matter what the structure, the same concerns must be addressed: 1. The balance between personal freedom and responsibility to the community; 2. The amount of authority the church leaders will have over the beliefs and actions of the people; 3. How much authority leaders will have (or will be given) to speak to and for the divine.

Questions for thought and discussion

1. From where does the power and authority of your church leaders come? From God (directly or indirectly)? From the people? From some other source?
2. How does your church make decisions? Is it a democratic process? Do leaders get to make the decisions with or without consultation of members?
3. How does someone become a minister or pastor in your church? Are they ordained by an authority figure such as a bishop? By the congregation? Some other way?
4. What do your answers to the first three questions say about your Unitarian theology and your relationship to the divine?