

## **Preaching Afrofuturism to White Unitarian Universalist Congregations**

by Tony Lorenzen

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I'm a middle aged, straight, cisgender, white man. I have no great advice about how to preach afrofuturism to a congregation of white people. I know, I know, I need a different title for this paper. The Afrofuturist movement and its aesthetic certainly offers a great deal of preachable material, moments, and concepts. Preaching afrofuturism can be done, by preachers of any race and color, but white people preaching it to white people adds an added degree of difficulty in that even though it may be preached, it may not be heard. Afrofuturism is certainly able to support preaching about recentering Black experience, white supremacy, and racism. Preaching about racial justice to white people in general necessitates dealing with the concepts of white privilege and white fragility. I believe science fiction has come to take on the role of scripture in our culture and afrofuturism functions this way too. The world of Science Fiction is a shared common mythology that helps people define who they are and how they should be.

Theologically, afrofuturism has much to offer to when preaching about important theological ideas. For example, soteriology and salvation - if all aren't even included, how are all saved? What is salvation? How is it seen differently depending upon your race and other social locations? As it deals in the future, afrofuturism provide opportunity to explore eschatology - the final destination and goal of the soul and humankind.

I present three homilies. One is about defining the terms necessary to really delve more deeply into afrofuturism. The second is about the world of science fiction as contemporary scripture and how afrofuturism can also function in this way. The third points out theological concepts for which afrofuturism can offer examples and gateways to understanding and help dismantle white supremacy in the association and our congregations.

### **Defining Terms**

Preaching about afrofuturism will certainly be better received by white people if some prior work on dismantling white supremacy has already been engaged. If the congregation is already doing anti-racism work and has already begun to confront its own racism and white supremacy culture, afrofuturism provides a topic that allows creative and expansive ways to reinforce the importance of that work and explore art in service to liberation and anti-racism work, among other things. If the congregation hasn't yet truly begun this work, afrofuturism provides a lot of examples of how Black experience is decentered, marginalized, and ignored in ways white people have trouble recognizing. At the very least, preaching about afrofuturism requires

presenting some basic definitions and understanding a few important terms: white supremacy/white supremacy culture, white privilege, and white fragility.

White supremacy can be taught as an intellectual concept - an important and dangerous one, but one that can be understood by the head, the mind, the intellect, and the use of reason. I believe most white people can come to a rational understanding that our Euro-American culture has been designed and created by white people for the benefit of white people and this reality shows up in our cultural tendencies, even and especially in our white churches, as a set of individual and group behaviors such as perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, paternalism, individualism, either/or thinking, scarcity thinking, the priority of objective viewpoints, and other traits.<sup>1</sup>

Understanding white privilege and its dynamic duo partner white fragility are more emotional issues for white people, not a matter of mere rational understanding. Rationally, it is easy to understand some people have advantages that others don't. Emotionally, it's more difficult to deal with the fact that you personally have benefitted from those advantages and life (including your life), never mind the job market (including your profession and career), isn't a meritocracy. Before delving deeper into racism, the congregation has to hear about how racism is not individual acts of discrimination but a system developed and adapted over hundreds of years and how all encompassing racism and white privilege is. The congregation has to hear sermons about how emotionally defensive all people can be and how white people are extremely emotionally defensive about having their attitudes and assumptions challenged around the topic of race and privilege. I'm still not sure how to best present this. The level of white fragility I've encountered among my white congregation is staggering.

One way into the discussion of whiteness and racism is to find an event in the past or present life of the congregation to serve as an example or case study material to point out and explain instances of white supremacy culture, privilege, and fragility. This grounds the sermon and the learning in the here and now (or the here and before) of the congregation, not "out there" in the world somewhere.

The example I used recently in my congregation was the fact that for the first half of the 20th century the congregation participated in blackface minstrel shows put on by the town of Hopedale and produced its own blackface minstrel shows as fundraisers for the church.

In the wake of the news about Virginia's Governor Ralph Northam and its Attorney General I received an email from a colleague who was doing a quick Google search for information on

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.csworkshop.org/PARC\\_site\\_B/dr-culture.html](http://www.csworkshop.org/PARC_site_B/dr-culture.html) - White Supremacy Culture  
From Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001

Unitarian churches and blackface minstrel shows. The email pointed me to the “Minstrel Shows” page on the [www.hopedale1842.com](http://www.hopedale1842.com) website. Sure enough, the website has a page featuring photographs and clippings of advertisements and coverage of the shows presented at Hopedale (MA) Town Hall and the Union Congregational Church. There’s also a program from a 1939 minstrel show at Hopedale Unitarian Parish, which also presented and hosted them on a regular basis.

When I suggested to the current leadership of my congregation that they publish a public apology on behalf of the congregation and its former members and leaders for engaging in the racist and demeaning practice of minstrel shows, the push back was a violent shove. It wasn’t blow back, it was a hurricane. Emails and phones messages poured in. The common themes: Why did I always have to be so political? Why is everything always about race? Is it really appropriate to apologize for the past, and the less enlightened behavior of other white people? I responded in private and in public via newsletters and sermons. Half the board and half the membership were in 100 percent agreement with me and half were wholeheartedly against the apology.

### **Sermon 1 - Confronting Our White Supremacy Culture**

Reading: An Excerpt from “A Discourse on the Subject of American Slavery” by Adin Ballou.<sup>2</sup>  
Sermon: “Apologizing for our Ancestors”

As you know, we’ve recently been made aware of a part of our congregational history that has been forgotten for many years, specifically that we used to participate in the production of blackface minstrel shows. I believe we need to apologize for this past congregational behavior publicly. As a people called to dismantle white supremacy culture, we are remiss as Unitarian Universalists if we just let it go. We might say something like:

*Hopedale Unitarian Parish apologizes for its past practice of hosting, producing, and promoting blackface minstrel shows in our church and in the town of Hopedale. White people covering their faces with shoe polish or make-up to mock black features and behavior through emphasizing ignorant stereotypes is racist and wrong. It was wrong in decades past and is still wrong today. We are sorry for the pain these productions caused for Black people in our area then and for the pain the images and artifacts of them can still cause. As Unitarian Universalists, we are committed to dismantling white supremacy culture in our denomination and in society at large. One step in dismantling our culture of white supremacy is owning our past racist behavior and doing our best to create a church, a town, and a society that respects the dignity and worth of all people. Our congregation shares origins with the town of Hopedale which began as religious community heavily involved in the abolition movement in the years*

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A.

*leading up to the Civil War. Our founder Adin Ballou would have been horrified at the minstrel shows. We seek to reclaim for our congregation and the town the spirit of our founders as we seek forgiveness for the time in our history when we abandoned that spirit.*

Some of you have already registered firm objections with me so I want to address some of the things I've been talking about with some of you. I think this gives us a good opportunity to explore some important concepts that are frequently misunderstood due to our emotional reactions to them.

I want to begin with "white privilege." White privilege is about the inherent advantages we have solely because we are white. It does not mean that any individual white life is without hardship, pain, or injustice. It does mean that whatever hardship, pain, or injustice you have faced in your white life would have in actuality been worse had you been Black and had the same experience. If it helps to do so, think of privilege as immunity. Being white in our society makes one immune to many things we will never have to feel or experience just because of our immunity. White people are immune to being denied housing due to the color of their skin. White people are immune to the problem of having to represent all white people in a classroom or workplace, team or group. This list goes on and on. One aspect of privilege is being able to ignore racial justice issues if they don't impact you personally. This allows white people to label racial justice "political" and then claim no interest in politics. Choosing to be apolitical is the epitome of privilege. I do not talk about racial justice because it's political. I talk about it because treating every human being with dignity and respect is the cornerstone of my Unitarian Universalist faith. I can not condone immunity to racial justice because the issues are political.

If even discussing white privilege, white supremacy, and racism bother us and make us defensive, this is called "white fragility." White fragility encompasses thinking such as "How dare someone think I'm racist?" or "I'm a good person. I don't hate Black people." Getting offended and emotional whenever our own personal white attitudes and behavior are called into question shifts the issue at hand to our white feelings instead of the reality of racism experienced by others.

I've been asked why I preach so much about racism if I'm white myself. First of all, it's the right thing to do to call out racism and white supremacy when you see it. More importantly, it is precisely because I am white that I feel called to point out racism and white supremacy culture to other white people. I preach about this in order to use my privilege in a way that might allow other white people to hear something about racism and white supremacy that they might otherwise ignore or dismiss. I know full well I am sometimes guilty of being blind to my own privilege and favoring my own white fragility. But having privilege and being fragile aren't the big sins. Ignoring them is. It is not my job, nor is there any need, to point out racism to Black people. Black people don't need white people to tell them that putting on shoe polish or make-up to mock black features and behavior through emphasizing ignorant stereotypes is racist and wrong.

The very nature of the evil of white supremacy is that it so controls the way we think, act, and perceive the world around us that white people don't even notice how the way we think, act, speak – even the way we are in the world – has been and still remains controlled and affected by it. It is something that unseen, goes unseen until a breakthrough of consciousness occurs. This is often called “waking up” or “being woke.” Once awake we tend to be aware of it and see it increasingly easily. We wonder how – because it is so obvious and ever present – how we could have ever missed it at all? Once we unlearn what we have learned, going back to sleep is either impossible or intentional.

Once we wake up, even a little bit, it is incumbent upon us to continue to work on unlearning the world view, language, and behaviors of white supremacy. The more we do this, the more we see that racism is a system; that white supremacy is system. It is an interconnected web of cultural norms, mores, attitudes, language, and even laws, that insist on the inferiority of Black people and that this inferiority of status and place be maintained and preserved no matter the cost.

Learning about the systemic nature of racism and white supremacy helps us to move past some misconceptions about them. Racism is not individual acts of hatred and prejudice committed against Black people by a single white person or groups of white people. Those are racist behaviors. Racism and white supremacy are systems that go far beyond any one “bad” individual's treatment of others.

We need to be aware of and take responsibility for our past immoral behavior. I believe we are called upon to communicate to our community of Hopedale the need to recognize, own, and apologize for its past immoral behavior. Unless we acknowledge and address our white supremacy and racism we perpetuate the myth that we can ignore past injustices; the myth that past injustices have no bearing on the present reality. We are not allowed to dismiss blackface and minstrel shows as “those silly racist things our ancestors did,” sure in our believe that we are not like them. This is white fragility at work. This perpetuates racism as individual acts of prejudice and perpetuates our white privilege. It is painful to admit that people from our congregation or our town did this horrible thing. We shouldn't use our immunity to keep ourselves immune from the pain caused by racism. I hope that my preaching about and our talking about the minstrel shows in church helps us become less fragile.

I do not consider myself nor do I believe any of you are a white supremacist – one who believes white people are superior. But I am a fool if I think my behavior is free from the influence of white supremacy. I will do what I can to dismantle white supremacy. I will also make mistakes and apologize for them and carry on, doing my best to continue to take apart a racist culture and build a less racist one. Part of that work is calling out things such as blackface and minstrel shows as immoral evils. They were then, they are now, and they always will be.

One way we can help dismantle white supremacy is to make sure people know examples of it when they see it. Minstrel shows are such examples. Another way to dismantle white

supremacy is to let others know we understand the importance of destroying it by apologizing for our complicity in its creation and its perpetuation. This is why I encourage us to offer formal public apologies for the minstrel shows.

Apologies for historical events and the behaviors of one's ancestors are indeed complex and controversial, but this doesn't mean we should shy away from them. Quite the opposite. I believe our congregation and our town need to issue apologies as a congregation and as a town. Both the congregation and the town are institutions. These institutions have a public presence and public voice. Like it or not, we who are involved in these institutions – the current leaders and members of the congregation and the current citizens and government of the town – are the current incarnation of the very same institutions that engaged in this blatantly racist activity, so an institutional apology is appropriate. I don't think we can speak for any of the individual performers or producers of the minstrel shows, but we can and should apologize as a congregation for the congregation's behavior and as a town for the town's. The individuals who make up the institutions may be different now than they were then, but the institution is the same institution. Institutional apologies make clear the systemic nature of racism and white supremacy. Racism and white supremacy culture are so intimately woven into our society that we often fail to see it in a "the fish doesn't recognize the water it swims in" fashion. An institutional apology allows us to make this point and to point out that racist behavior of the past is part of the problem that perpetuates the ongoing system of racism and white supremacy experienced in the present.

Apologizing is a humble act of goodwill and good faith. It acknowledges what our institutions did was wrong and since we can't go back in history and make the minstrel shows not happen, we can and should at the very least make a public statement that we know they were wrong and we are sorry that our institutions engaged in this behavior and that this behavior is still wrong. Is a photograph of a group of white men in blackface in Hopedale during the 1930s any less harmful than the photo of the governor of Virginia from the 1980s? Or less than any contemporary racist depiction hurts now?

Owning our institutional behavior might also lead to more moments of engagement and more learning opportunities. Our entire nation was built on the backs of enslaved Africans and on land stolen from native inhabitants who were victims of genocide. At some point, our nation will have to make amends for this behavior. In light of the scope of that endeavor, an apology from a tiny church and a tiny town in Massachusetts is the humblest of contributions towards creating the beloved community.

### **New Skins for New Wine**

We live in a time when attendance at religious worship is down, membership in a faith community is down, and the nones or the unchurched, or religiously unaffiliated are the largest religious group in America. We live in an age where Biblical literacy is in sharp decline.

Stephen Prothero, in his 2007 book *Religious Literacy* discussed a poll from the year 2000 where 75 percent of Americans responded the aphorism “God helps those who help themselves” is from the Bible. It’s not. Today, the Judeo-Christian values and classical western tradition is learned not from the classics and ancient sacred texts, but from new classics of popular culture, especially science fiction where many plots and storylines follow the hero’s journey. This is even more applicable in Unitarian Universalist congregations, where in my experience Biblical literacy is negligible at best, but geekiness might be the predominate cultural connection between any diverse group of Unitarian Universalists. *UU World* magazine published an essay about this by Erik Gern in the Winter 2015 issue titled “The Chalice and the Force: Why have so many ‘geeks’ found their spiritual home in Unitarian Universalism?”

Among the observations in this essay: There are Unitarian Universalist Geek Facebook groups (yes more than one). There are a lot of geek culture heroes who were or are Unitarian Universalists such as Rod Serling and Ray Bradbury. Science Fiction and Fantasy are used as references and examples in sermon by many ministers. General Assembly resembles a Comic Con.

*“There’s no one reason why many UUs are geeks, it would seem,”* writes Gern. *“Some look for faith traditions and moral systems in church that are similar to those they find in their beloved stories, from cinema to books to graphic novels. Others find refuge in a place where they can be themselves, where their “geekiness” is accepted as part of their identity alongside sexual orientation, race, and gender identity.”*

## **Sermon 2 - A New Scripture**

Reading: “The Chalice and The Force” excerpts by Erik Gern

Sermon: “The Sacred Texts of Geeks and Blerds”

Due to the inclusive nature of Unitarian Universalism, the sacred texts of any one of the world’s major religions will not be held in the same regard by everyone in any given congregation. It’s quite possible that more people in any given Unitarian Universalist congregation will share a common knowledge of the Lord of the Rings than the New Testament. With geek culture so predominate, it’s not far fetched to assert the cannon of fantasy and sci-fi functions like scripture.

The word scripture from its Latin roots means simply writing, but in religious contexts writing that has deep meaning, a place of honor and respect. Through its revered place in culture scripture connect people via a shared knowledge and a history of interpretation and commentary.

Thomas Shoemaker, a professor of religious studies at Mesa Community College in AZ, notes in one of his course handouts<sup>3</sup> that writing about God is not enough - Plenty of people have written about God and the book of Esther (the original Hebrew not the redacted Septuagint Greek) doesn't mention God at all. He notes that the word sacred doesn't help for what makes writing sacred? It's venerated by whom and why? Sacred because it deals in faith? Neither does revelation help us, he argues, how do we decide what's a true revelation and a false one? If it depends on faith, whose faith? By what authority? Shoemaker looks at a long list of near 20 sacred texts and asks what do they have in common? The commonalities include:

- provide a reasonable moral system
- make sense of the seeming chaos of daily life
- direct us to a path to a satisfying individual life
- create a community from disparate peoples
- provide a widely accepted justification of a political, social or economic system

Missing from the (above) list is an age requirement, although many of the world's religions go back thousands of years. Dianetics for example, the scripture of Scientology, was published in 1950. Nor is it a requirement for something to last forever-even though we may be dealing in lengthy periods of time, scriptures come and go - for example the Didache, The Letters of Irenaeus of Lyon, The Enuma Elish, are but a few examples of sacred writing no longer considered scripture, even by the religious group that produced them. Scriptures come and go as do religions. And many works of contemporary fantasy and sci-fi possess enough of the qualities of scripture for us to consider them so.

Using Shoemaker's criteria along with the characteristics of holding a place of honor and respect. Through its revered place in culture connects people via a common knowledge and a history of interpretation and commentary, science fiction can make an argument for itself as scripture. As many well circulated works in the first centuries of the common era vied for a place in the canon of the Christian testament, so are works of science fiction vying for inclusion in the canon today.

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<sup>3</sup> Available online at <http://www.mesacc.edu/~thoqh49081/handouts/scripture.html>

Examples are plentiful but I'll use the worlds and franchises of Star Trek, Star Wars, and Battlestar Galactica for focus. Each of these stories has at its center a reasonable moral system. Star Wars has The Force - the source of everything in the universe, good and bad. Work with the good to keep the bad in check, in yourself and in the universe. Star Wars has its Prime Directive (technically Starfleet General Order 1): Do not interfere with the internal and natural development of any alien civilization. Or as we might say in our universe, do no harm. Battlestar Galactica's ethos is survival. Unlike the other two franchises it's reasonable (understandable) moral system is kill or be killed. Whereas Star Trek and Star Wars are analogous to the Judeo Christian tradition in their rules for being and doing good. The Battlestar Galactica universe is a Zen koan: Is mere survival worth giving up the best of what makes us human? When it gets down to it, is it possible to value both the good and survival? If humanity does good in the universe but doesn't live to tell about it, was it good?

Throughout the franchises the moral systems in each universe help the heroes make sense of daily life, help them try to live well, and imperfectly create a community from disparate peoples. Each franchise helps us understand the heroes justification of its respective political, social, and economic systems. The Star Trek universe operates on an egalitarian intergalactic socialism. The Star Wars universe operates on a Zoroastrian type of dualism combined with an American fixation on individual liberty. Battlestar Galactica's universe is the democratic rule of law. As with scriptures of any type Science Fiction fans can and do cite episodes and stories like chapter and verse and argue about their meanings and lessons in a manner not unlike exegesis or students in a yeshiva arguing over the Talmud.

And just like any scriptural or religious systems, science fiction is not perfect. Gern's essay notes that geek culture, not unlike Unitarian Universalism, still deals with the problems of sexism and racism. The original Star Trek series had one serious female crew member, for example, and the rest were either romantic interests of Captain Kirk, throwaway episode characters who served a storyline purpose, or aliens and/or villains. The franchise didn't get its first female lead until 1995 when Captain Kathryn Janeway commanded the eponymous ship on Star Trek: Voyager. Star Wars had only Princess Leia until the prequels gave us Padme Amidala and recent installments introduced more leading women. Women were similarly absent in Battlestar Galactica when it debuted in the 1970s, but its 2004 reboot series did better, making some male characters from the original such as Starbuck female and having a woman President. Although you could argue that Number 6, one of the enemy androids called Cylons was stereotypical enough as an intentional sex symbol to offset the other progress.

Since our current topic is exploring our white supremacy culture, I want to focus on that and the absence of people of color from science fiction. In his 1994 essay “Black to the Future” in which he coined the term afrofuturism, Mark Dery asks, “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers — white to a man — who have engineered our collective fantasies?” Being white we don’t notice when non white people are missing. Nor do we notice when white presence is emphasized. We have an example of this in our church office.

The large full color biblical illustrations painted on the office walls are exactly how white supremacy culture functions and is perpetuated. A blue eyed pre-adolescent Jesus clothed in white, sits in the center of a group of older, dark haired, dark skinned men in robes of muted blue, green, brown, and gray. An adult Jesus with light skin, golden hair and beard, blue eyes, and white robe teaches his dark skinned, dark haired, dull robed disciples. A light skinned, brown haired blue eyed baby Moses is plucked from the Nile by Pharaoh’s daughter and her attendants, all obviously Egyptian Africans. These artist, I am sure, painted these in good faith, but to contemporary eyes they seem shockingly racist. Both saviours of the people, Moses and Jesus are blindingly white - when in reality they looked more like all the other African and semitic people that surround them in the scenes.

Interesting how two men of color, even when they are the heroes - the messiahs - become white. The artist would most likely be horrified and quite a bit ticked off were you to suggest at the time of his painting these that he left the color out of the heroes of color on purpose in some racist, white-supremacist attitude of eliminating the experience of people of color from their place as central scriptural figures. And yet, intentional or not, that’s exactly what it looks like. And this is white supremacy culture. Now that I’ve pointed this out, if our first reaction is shock, if we are jumping immediately to the artists defense, if we feel our character and the of the congregation has been attacked, this in turn is an example of white fragility.

Our white eurocentric lens turns people from the middle east into people who look like Europeans. That’s not surprising, but 150 years after the end of slavery, you’d think we’d put the semitic back into the semites and the black back into the African characters. But quite often we don’t.

White supremacy culture minimizes and erases the presence and contributions of non whites from our history, our culture and our art. This reinforces the supremacy of whiteness because it's difficult to become what you can not imagine. It's difficult to imagine anything for which you have no reference, no examples, no jumping off point.

If we need to be aware to put the person of color back in Jesus when we picture the stories from the New Testament we also need to be alert to making sure we do even better with scripture that is designed to envision a better future. Just as Christianity has evolved to inculturate Jesus, because many Christians are non white and non European, so science fiction is evolving in to inculturate it's speculative future worlds because Black geeks and nerds have not seen themselves reflected in those future worlds, even the egalitarian future utopias that claimed to have moved beyond such discrimination.

The first season of the TV show *Blackish* featured an episode called "The Nod" that highlighted the lack of attention paid to black geek culture. In this episode the father Dre Johnson (played by Anthony Anderson) noticed that his high school aged son, Junior (played by Marcus Scribner) doesn't seem to understand "the nod" the cultural predisposition for people of color to acknowledge each other with a nod of the head in white settings. He thinks he's failed as a parent until he notices that Junior does acknowledge others with knowing nods and other mutually understood acknowledgements of presence of being seen in the majority world, only the classmates his son nods to aren't people of color, but other geeks. Junior is a Blerd, a Black nerd.

Afrofuturism is a movement in art, music and literature that recenters the African, and Afro-diaspora experience. Frequently it deals in an imagined future that incorporates not only the presence of black people, but black culture and history. The term was first used by Mark Derry in a 1994 essay titled "Black to the Future" and has come to be associated with an aesthetic that explores the connection and interplay of African Diaspora Culture with Technology.

Ytasha L. Womack begins her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black SCI-FI and Fantasy Culture*, by describing how she dressed up as Princess Leia for Halloween when she was growing up. There were no black characters in her beloved Star Wars, so she picked the princess. The character that was black, Darth Vader, was the embodiment of evil and at the end we learn he is a white man played by a white man in a Black suit, yet voiced by Black actor James Earl Jones.

Afrofuturist cartoonist Tim Fielder laments in a TED Talk that all he had in Star Wars was Lando Calrissian.<sup>4</sup> (How embedded is Star Wars in popular culture? The Google docs dictionary recognized when you spell Calrissian incorrectly!) Womack asks what if Lando Calrissian had NOT lost the Millennium Falcon spaceship to Han Solo in a poker game. Would a Black man have helped save the universe from the evil Empire? Would a Black character have been Princess Leia's love interest?

Womack discusses wanting to be a writer and wanting to write historical fiction, but centering Black people in that narrative was difficult. Who would the characters be? Slaves? Victims of Jim Crow? Afrofuturism allows not only the creation of future that recenters the Black experiences but also reimagining the past in ways that honor and center the Black experience without having to resort to the themes of overcoming adversity, struggle, and victimization. Afrofuturism allows a future as well as a past based on a heroic not a subservient Black past. Black people live the story of the science fiction alien in real life every day, always the alien other in white society. An experience few of us have never known. And that's why making space in Unitarian Universalism for people of color is so difficult for white Unitarian Universalists.

## **Octopus' Garden**

### **3rd Sermon - A New Source and A New Principle**

Reading: "Earthseed: The Book of the Living" by Lauren Oya Olamina, Excerpt  
Sermon: "Expanding the Foundations of Unitarian Universalism"

Let me tell you how the world was made.

At the beginning there was a huge drop of milk. Then Doondari (God) came and he created the stone. Then the stone created iron; And iron created fire; And fire created water; And water created air. The Doondari descended a second time. And he took the five elements And he shaped them into man. But man was proud. Then Doondari created blindness and blindness defeated man. But when blindness became too proud,

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<sup>4</sup> [https://youtu.be/auoz1jy0\\_b8](https://youtu.be/auoz1jy0_b8)

Doondari created sleep, and sleep defeated blindness; But when sleep became too proud, Doondari created worry, and worry defeated sleep; But when worry became too proud, Doondari created death, and death defeated worry. But when death became too proud, Doondari descended for the third time, And he came as Gueno, the eternal one And Gueno defeated death.

This story of creation and cosmology comes from the Fulani people of Mali. It's not a variation of the Biblical creation but its own story. It is an origin story for a culture that isn't ours. Even though it is a religious or mythic story it still seems a bit out of place in our white Unitarian Universalist worship experience. It needs explanation and identification in order for us to use it as a reference for meaning.

In her TED Talk from 2017, Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor compares human and octopus intelligence to explain the difference between science fiction and Afrofuturism. She says "Like humans, octopuses are some of the most intelligent creatures on earth. However, octopus intelligence evolved from a different evolutionary line, separate from that of human beings, so the foundation is different. The same can be said about the foundations of various forms of science fiction."

Afrofuturism isn't just Black science fiction, it is imagining a future that comes from Black foundations, history, and experience. It's not a Black add-on to white futuristic imaginings which, for all their progress and multi-ethnic characters and aliens, is based on a white European foundation.

Centering, the recent book of essays by Unitarian Universalist ministers of color begins with an essay from Rev. Darrick Jackson who says that one big sadness he has about Unitarian Universalist worship is that it is so disembodied. The Black AME church in which he grew up is fully embodied as people clap, sing, sway, and exclaim "Amen!" He still finds Unitarian Universalist worship still and almost silent by comparison. He ponders why it can't also include more embodiment. Being disembodied isn't just stylistic it is about not being able to be himself as who he is and his spirituality is still not OK, still not comfortable for others. Rev. Rosemary Bray McNatt in a response to an essay notes that among the hardest things to get used to as a Black Unitarian Universalist is how much of a strong, almost allergic reaction some Unitarian Universalists have to God and god language. It still baffles her how a religion that claims theological pluralism can forget that pluralism also includes her theism, born of her Black Catholic background. Rev. Jackson and Rev. Bray-McNatt are not engaging the usual Unitarian Universalist dichotomies of atheism versus theism or spiritual versus intellectual. Rather their observations highlight something akin to the difference

between octopus and human intelligence and science fiction and afrofuturism. Their observations come not from choosing a side in religious preference debate but from completely different foundations. What if we can bring faith foundations of people of color into our living tradition. Not as black adaptations of white foundations, but in their own right. Perhaps Afrofuturism could help us do this.

The comic book character T'Challa, The Black Panther was created by Marvel Comics' writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby (two second generation American Jews) and debuted in an issue of the comic book The Fantastic Four in 1961. Through the 60s and 70s Black Panther would guest star in The Avengers and other Marvel titles. Black Panther got his own comic book in 1977. Black Panther was revived by Marvel in 1998 and again in 2005. In 2016 Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote for the series.<sup>5</sup>

Black Panther is an example of afrofuturism (if you missed the last sermon), the creative intersection of sci-fi and African pride, culture and technology. T'Challa is the king of Wakanda, an super advanced African civilization that has used it's superior technology to hide itself from the world. Wakanda appears to the world as yet another poor, developing African nation, but it's not. It is in fact far superior to the rest of the world, and more pointedly, the white world. Black Panther contains its own version of African history and culture, based on themes of actual African cultures, that serve as foundation for its characters and their interaction with the world. The recent film made of this comic franchise provides an example of the foundational switch. The only white characters of any note whatsoever are a United States CIA agent who functions as a bumbling white side-kick to the Black heroes and a villain - an international crime boss. Virtually every character is Black. The Wakandan army is made up of women and a woman is their equivalent of the chairperson of the joint chiefs of staff. A woman is Wakanda's brightest scientific mind. When you start from a different foundation, the world you create is very different indeed.

In the movie T'Challa struggles to hold onto the throne and to the identity of Black Panther that goes with it and through this struggle is convinced that it's time for Wakanda to use it's advanced technology to assist the world instead of hide from it. Wakanda's assistance is especially needed to help the African diaspora overcome the results of hundreds of years of racism, enslavement, and discrimination. Black Panther offers an eschatology that sees the final destination of humanity as a more beloved community created by the intervention of a savior Africa.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.marvel.com/comics/discover/460/black-panther>

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* offers a different type afrofuturistic messiah. Lauren Oya Olamina is a Black teenager in walled middle class Los Angeles suburban community (not unlike the walled churches of medieval Europe) in the final days of America as we now know it somewhere in the near future. She's an empath and physically feels the pain of others. Raised in the Black church which her father pastors, she learns survivalist skills as society collapses around her. When her walled neighborhood finally collapses she goes on the run, gathering a ragtag bunch of followers. She teaches them a new religion which she calls Earthseed because humanity's destiny is to reach for the stars. God in her cosmology is change. In this Parable, the savior is a Black woman who guides her people through an apocalypse on the way toward humanity's final destiny which she believes is not of this world.

Parable is part road saga and part survivalist epic, but it also speaks to what humanity might need to do in order to save itself. The answer is to start over, to recreate religion and recreate society. It's not unlike what the intersectional movement for peace and justice is attempting to do. It's not unlike what Unitarian Universalism is trying to do in dismantling our white supremacy culture.

Unitarian Universalism is neither Unitarianism nor Universalism. In its boldest incarnation it is a new way to be religious that if it can move past it's Unitarian and Universalist white supremacy cultures could establish a new way. Maybe. Possibly. But we have to expand the foundation from which we will build. We need new cornerstones to go with our old white ones. We have begun to scratch the surface of moving in this direction, but it may require the collapse of our establishment, the way Earthseed required the collapse of society.

If Unitarian Universalism is to live into its aspirational claim of the dignity and worth of every person, it will have to do so from a myriad and multifaceted spiritual and theological foundation. That foundation needs to expand to include the cornerstones of religious experience and expression of Unitarian Universalists of color. In order to this our task is not unlike the task of consolidating the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church.

The tale Warren Ross tells in his book *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* is a tale of forging a new religious community out of two different religious foundations. Quite a lot of negotiation was required to merge the two traditions into one new religion. The Unitarians, steeped in an intellectual tradition and organizational system that was born and developed in circles of the rich and powerful from Diet of Torda to the Channing Unitarianism of the east coast Brahmin

merchants had to adhere to the Universalism of John Murray created through circuit riding evangelism of rural New England. It was not easy. And we still feel the implication of foundation sharing in our midst today. Some Unitarian Universalist people and some congregations are at heart old school Unitarians or old school Universalists, but I think the majority are now something related but different - Unitarian Universalist.

If we are to dismantle white supremacy and create a faith community that shares its cultural, theological, and organizational center we will need to consolidate foundations of color and foundations of whiteness. If we succeed, I believe the faith community that arises will not be a reshaped Unitarian Universalism, but something new as Unitarian Universalism was in 1961.

The Unitarian Universalism of the future might include a dark skinned, dark haired middle eastern Jesus. We may have new scriptural literature such as "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" Perhaps in the not too distant future a Sunday morning's scripture will include not only the Gospel of Luke, but a story of how a young Luke learned from Yoda. One Sunday may feature a parable of Jesus, and the next Sunday a reading of the Living Tradition from *Earthseed: The Book of Living*:

"Create no images of God. Accept the images that God has provided. They are everywhere, in everything. God is Change— Seed to tree, tree to forest; Rain to river, river to sea; Grubs to bees, bees to swarm. From one, many; from many, one; Forever uniting, growing, dissolving— forever Changing. The universe is God's self-portrait."

## Appendix

### Cited Readings to be used with Sermons

An Excerpt from “A Discourse on the Subject of American Slavery” by Adin Ballou.

Obj. 8. The negroes are an inferior race. They are incapable of freedom and civil government. It is of no use to attempt their improvement. They are fit only for a state of slavery.

Ans. I pity the man who can seriously urge such an objection as this. I must deem his head or his heart, or both, disordered. It is but the groundless assertion of men, who themselves need a guardian, or a keeper. A thousand historical facts, a thousand facts of our own times, the contrivances of the slave system

to prevent the rise of its victims, reason, revelation, and observation, are all against this insane conclusion. The Africans are men — created by the same God, and of one blood with ourselves. They are capable of respectable attainments in all the arts, sciences, and morals of civilized life. Jesus Christ died for them, as well as for us. Heaven is as accessible to them as to us. They will stand before the same judgment-seat with us, before a Judge, who will give the master no preference over his slave. If the degradation of slavery has sunk the colored people of our country below their natural level, and ever so far below us, that is no reason why we should add wrong to wrong, by treading them still deeper in the mire. On the other hand, it is a good reason, why we should undo our wrongs, and endeavor to restore their broken nature to soundness. I disdain to go into arguments showing our obligations to provide for, protect, instruct, encour-

ao^e, reform and elevate these our unfortunate brethren. This is too plain to require argument. And we may rest assured, that we can never discharge our obligations, nor accomplish any thing to the purpose, without first terminating slavery.

The Chalice and the Force by Erik Gern

There's no one reason why many UUs are geeks, it would seem," writes Gern. "Some look for faith traditions and moral systems in church that are similar to those they find in their beloved stories, from cinema to books to graphic novels. Others find refuge in a place where they can be themselves, where their "geekiness" is accepted as part of their identity alongside sexual orientation, race, and gender identity.

Excerpt from Earthseed: The Book of the Living by Lauren Oya Olamina (Octavia Butler)

Create no images of God. Accept the images that God has provided. They are everywhere, in everything. God is Change— Seed to tree, tree to forest; Rain to river, river to sea; Grubs to bees, bees to swarm. From one, many; from many, one; Forever uniting, growing, dissolving— forever Changing. The universe is God's self-portrait.

Hi I need to know if it is possible to have a print order of 16 copies of an 18 page document ready for pick up in Westboro MA store by noon tomorrow (MON April 29 2019). IF it's not I can't place the order because I need them by then at the latest. IF that is possible, I will check out and submit and pay for the order. Thanks

2:33 PM