

CHRISTIANITY AND YOU YOU

By Pete Kersey...Lake County UU 2/5/12

I was very happy this morning to learn that your congregation is seeking the designation of a Welcoming Congregation. My congregation did so about six years ago and I commend it to you, we found it to be enjoyable and worthwhile. When we went through the lengthy process it pertained to more than sexual practices, it included ethnicity and skin color, but I content it is even more, it is also the various religions.

In the ten years I have been a member of the Unitarian Universalist religion, I have seen and heard far too many of us “bash Christianity.” That is the last thing we should be doing, ridiculing and insulting the Christian religion. There are too many of that faith who are in the questioning mode and as one person who was “crossing over” said “The phrase "Too UU to be Christian and too Christian to be UU" definitely applies!” Rather than criticize Christianity, we should simply be encouraging the asking of questions...after all, we UU’s are still questioning and questing after the truth.

Is not UU a religious community that openly welcomes anyone who exhibits a moral character and/or professes a belief in one religious thought or another?

That's what we say, but that's not what we all do. When we hear one of our members, or listen to ourselves bashing Christianity, are we being true to the ethics of our own religion? Are we truly being open and accepting of others? How can we possibly condemn anyone for saying they believe that Jesus is divine and is the son of God?

I have never heard a UU condemn Hindu's for their belief in Krishna or those who bow to Hanuman, the Hindu Demi-God in the figure of a flying monkey and the many armed figure of Vishnu one of Hinduism's major Gods.

The priests of Hindu appreciate Christianity in its several forms. Attend to this story from a man who was studying Hinduism in India.

www.uuworld.org/2000/0100commentary.html

From Scotty McLennan, "Finding A UU Spiritual Path:"

"By summer's end I had decided to become a Hindu. The morning I approached the priest with my decision, he took me to the front room, where we sat together on a Persian rug. The rain was coming down in sheets and banged against the roof.

"No, no!" he chided, to my astonishment once we had sat down. "You've missed the point of everything I've taught you. You've grown up a Christian and know a lot about that path. It's the religion of your family and your culture. You know almost nothing of Hinduism. Go back and be the best Christian you can."

He replied, "But I don't believe Jesus was any more divine than Krishna or the Buddha," he pleaded, as the rain continued pounding against the roof. "And Christians would condemn you for knowing about Jesus and not accepting him uniquely as your Lord and Savior."

And this Hindu priest told him, "Then go back and find a way to be an open, non-exclusive Christian, following in Jesus' footsteps yourself but appreciating others' journeys on their own paths." The more I learned about others' paths, he explained, the more it would help me progress along my own. Those words have remained my marching orders for life. Hard rain always reminds me when I forget. " End of story.

Recognizing that there are many paths to Heaven, Nirvana, or whatever you wish to call that final destination, is one of the hallmarks of Unitarian Universalism.

And yet, in the time since I joined UU in 2001, I have heard several members of this and other UU congregations ridicule Christians. This bothers me, especially considering the fact that UU's roots are in Christianity. The Unitarians originally were Christians who simply did not believe in the trinity theology, they espoused only one God figure. The Universalists were originally Christians who simply did not believe in original sin, and declared that all humanity was eligible for Heaven. Over the years since the two merged in the 1960's, the UU faith has leaned more and more toward believing that Jesus was an amazing religious teacher, but not the Son of God and UU has steered away from Christianity.

Much of that steering brought about by conflicts, uncomfortable or even unpleasant experiences by many of us during the time when we belonged to one

or another of the Christian denominations. This came about most often during times when we questioned some of the religious teachings we were receiving at church. Many of us were told in no uncertain terms that to question was heretical and not condoned. Would such a questioner turn to UU if they heard a member being totally disrespectful toward the Christian faith? Seems to me they would be much more inclined to turn in our direction if we simply spoke our principles and said to them “come, walk with me, I have questioned and I still do...it’s ok to question your faith.”

As a young man, in my twenties, I left the Baptist church after realizing that I had a real problem with the concept of original sin or that anyone not claiming Jesus as his or her savior was going to Hell. I was told, have faith, believe, but don’t question. That, coupled with observing many of its members living a life of hypocrisy, being true to the ten commandments on Sundays and cheating their fellow man during the week, finally compelled me to leave and I stayed away from all forms of organized religion until the Summer of 2001, about 40 years later. That’s when I visited the Vero Beach congregation as a guest speaker to a 4th Friday and really appreciated the quality of the questions and comments that came at me.

So, I gravitated to UU for purely intellectual reasons. Then gradually I realized that my personal and moral standards and belief in a way of life was really, in spite of not believing in a supernatural God, rather spiritual; much to my surprise. That feeling of spirituality and morality and being repulsed by hypocrisy led me to this sermon today.

Let me ask you former Christians ... are you still running away from an uncomfortable or unhappy Christian past...or are you beyond the fight or flight syndrome and ready to take a sharp look at what you fled from? Our UU District Executive Kenn Hurto posed the question, “are you like the child who stops believing in Santa but retains a fond feeling toward that figure, or are you still angry at Santa for not being real?” Let me ask you, are you one of those UU’s who angrily proclaim that this UU building is not a church, because church is a Christian word and we should not be using it? Yes, the dictionary first definition is a Christian place of worship, but the second, third and fourth descriptions are simply that a church is a place of worship, a congregation, a religious service. Sunday service in UU is all that.

Be careful though ... there are those among us who profess inclusion, but who are really practicing tokenism....like this comment from a black Jew’s experience in a

UU congregation, he talked about; “others that have tried and failed to “move beyond tokenism,” with well-intentioned but poorly executed attempts at inclusion, such as menorah candles lit in the wrong order and a Yom Kippur potluck.” A potluck dinner by UU’s to honor a Jewish day of fasting????

You’ve gotta be kidding! It is sad and amusing at the same time and it helps us to poke fun at ourselves. In the book “Homestretch” author Tom Owen-Towle says “Only when religion has honored both its serious and funny sides has it remained healthy and safe in human hands...because if we can joke about what we cherish and deem important, then we’ve achieved freedom and fulfillment.” He concluded, “Religion can afford to shed many a habit, but laughter isn’t one of them.” Let me try this on you: My home “church” minister, Rev Scott Alexander last year in one of his sermons said: “one of my friends, back in Washington, recently had a bumper sticker which read, “Jesus: Protect me from your followers!”

Let me follow that up by commenting that UU and Christianity share an ethical and moral center. Both strongly endorse social justice issues, especially among the Protestant denominations. We are ethically and morally extremely close.

It is sometimes unfortunate that we UU's are also human and have a tendency at times to paint a whole group with the brush meant for a subsystem of that group. In this case, we find voices among us that decry Christianity in general when they really are aiming at the fundamental branches of that religion. It is true that the fundamentalists certainly give us a target. As Reverend Alexander said, many seem to have drifted away from the core teaching of Jesus...love, social justice and equity amongst humankind.

Phil Zuckerman, Professor of Sociology, Pitzer College in Claremont, California, along with Dan Cady, assistant professor of history published an article entitled, "Why Evangelicals Hate Jesus." Just a touch over the mark I think. At any rate, based on a poll published by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, (<http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Tea-Party-and-Religion.aspx>) they said; "White Evangelical Christians are the group least likely to support politicians or policies that reflect the actual teachings of Jesus. It is perhaps one of the strangest, most dumb-founding ironies in contemporary American culture." They went on to say, "Evangelical Christians, who most fiercely proclaim to have a personal relationship with Christ, ... are simultaneously the very people most likely to reject his teachings ..." They concluded "Jesus unambiguously preached mercy and forgiveness. " These are the major virtues of Christianity, they said,

which seem to be shunted aside frequently by far too many in the fundamental branches of the religion.

Very well, our focus is on those who proclaim to follow a religion, but appear to be doing otherwise. Get out that brush, and tar away to your hearts content. Just use care that the brush does not slop over and dirty up those millions of Christians who are indeed doing their best to follow their religious path and the teachings of Jesus about mercy and forgiveness.

And ... keep in mind that, as this sermon title indicated, there are Christians within our ranks and you probably have no idea who. I would assume that my home congregation and this UU have pretty much the same demographic composition. I invite your attention to the results of a survey done at my home congregation, by the Vero Beach Religious Exploration program. One question was: "How do we identify ourselves today?" ...116 of **our** members and friends answered this survey and it revealed that there are 19 of us who self identify as at least partially Christian, that is close to 20 percent.

And, Just in case you did not know this; there is a national organization of UU's simply called the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship. Basically they adhere closely to the teachings of Jesus without necessarily believing in the

divinity of Christ or the resurrection. Nestling up that close to Christianity, they run into flack from some members of our faith. At the 2010 UU General Assembly Conference, attendee Susan Lawrence, managing editor of the UUA's Tapestry of Faith curricula wrote in their on-line discussion group, "we want our UU congregations to welcome us for who we are." She went on, "The conference helped me understand the accountability we each have in our UU communities to welcome each person to bring their whole self in. Because that's what this religion is about."

Yes - it - is....all about that, as expressed in the first two of our seven principles;

"The Inherent Worth and Dignity of Every Person"

"Justice, equity and compassion in human relations" You might be tempted to think that I am up here with the intent of heaping guilt upon your head ... not so. I confess to being guilty of Christian bashing too, in the past. But, in listening to some others do that, I grew more and more uneasy with those thoughts and began questioning myself strongly. Was I living up to my own principles when I laughingly ladled out a measure of ridicule upon the Christian faith, because I

personally disclaim that faith? I found myself squirming in embarrassment because my answer was very uncomfortable.

I realized that I was looking upon the Hindu variety of Gods and saying to myself, OK Pete, I cannot believe in that, but I am not going to cast aspersions on those who do believe it. And at the same time, I was looking upon Christians without having that same understanding. It was hypocrisy in myself and I did not like that thought at all.

I ask of you, to not feel guilty if you have been harboring that kind of thought process ... just ... stop it. When and if such a thought arises unbidden, examine it closely. Take another look at our first two UU principles about dignity of all and compassion toward everyone, step back away from the Christian bashing and do as the Reverend Scott Alexander said earlier this year “bring your behavior in line with your beliefs.”

Think on this...when you consider the followers of Christianity ... A quote from Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin... “Unitarianism” he said, “is a feather-bed to catch a falling Christian.” Don’t chase Christians away from us with negative conversations.