

“Are We Christian?”
Sermon by Sharon Wylie
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Marin in San Rafael, CA
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I grew up unchurched. When I asked my mom about our religion, she told me, “Just say you’re Christian,” and I did have a bible and a book of bible stories to read. We went to church just once a year, on Easter, to my grandmother’s Methodist church. But somehow, I know the Lord’s prayer, the one I just recited, I know it by heart. I’ve known it by heart since childhood.

Theologically, this prayer doesn’t speak to me in the slightest. My personal spiritual practice is Pagan and Earth-centered, and has been for 20 years. I don’t resonate with the idea of God as a father figure, I don’t believe there’s a heaven, I’m ambivalent about the idea of God’s kingdom and what that might mean, I don’t believe we are subject to God’s will, I don’t believe God tests us or delivers us or judges us or even provides us with bread. Maybe I can live with the METAPHOR of “give us this day our daily bread.” That’s about it.

But when I said this prayer out loud to myself earlier this week, in preparation for today, it brought tears to my eyes. Its familiarity took me back to childhood, to my bedroom with its peach walls and brown and white checkered bedspread. There was a period of time when I WANTED to read the bible in its entirety. It seemed to me important; people referred to stories and ideas from the bible all the time. I thought I should know what was in there. I planned to read a chapter a day. And I probably remembered to do this for a couple of weeks at most, and then I forgot all about it. Reading it would have taken me over three years, by

the way.

No matter what my theological beliefs today, Christianity is part of who I am. It's the religion of my childhood, and the religion of my ancestors. My REJECTION of Christianity as a teenager was an important part of my spiritual development. I have studied Islam and Judaism and Buddhism and others of the world's religions, but my relationship to Christianity is different. It's INTIMATE. It's tender. Christianity is the old boyfriend I don't want to run into, the one I hope is unhappy and sorry for how he treated me.

So I want us to talk this morning about our COLLECTIVE relationship to Christianity. The relationship of Unitarian Universalism to our theological ancestor, Christianity. I want us to wrestle with our Christian past, and to reflect on what our relationship with Christianity might be going forward.

This feels important to me for several reasons. First, our Christian heritage lives on in ways we don't realize. Our worship services, in particular, feel very Protestant to those who come to us from non-Protestant traditions. And there's nothing wrong with that except that I think most of us don't know how Christian our worship services feel in format. Certainly the emphasis on sermon comes from our Protestant background. Second, and even more importantly, many of us come to Unitarian Universalism with a lot of anger toward Christianity. For many of us, it's an unhealed wound, a scab we keep picking at. We keep making arguments against Christianity as if it's 1819 and we're just breaking off to form a new denomination. Our resentments are not going to get better if we keep ignoring them.

So, I'll begin with our history. Bear with me; I'll try to keep it short and interesting. Historically, the Unitarian and Universalist denominations formed as DISSENTING Christian traditions here in what would become the United States. Both traditions rejected the Calvinism of the Puritans. Calvinism is the idea that God has pre-selected who will be saved in the afterlife, so...it doesn't really matter what you do. Your salvation is in God's hands, and your actions don't matter much. This theology was meant to be HELPFUL. It was meant to help people quit worrying about whether or not they were saved and simply to trust in God, but instead, of course, people became paranoid about salvation. The idea that we are powerless to determine our own spiritual future, was profoundly oppressive.

Reverend John Murray began preaching the idea of universal salvation in 1770. This was the idea that salvation is available to EVERYONE, not just God's elect. The first Universalist church was founded in Massachusetts in 1779, and the first convention of Universalists was held in Philadelphia in 1790.

Now, the Unitarians didn't WANT to be our own denomination. We were part of the "Standing Order" of New England, those Congregational churches established by the Puritans. But some of the ministers of the Standing Order began to doubt the doctrines of Calvinism. Instead, they began to preach about God's kindness, humanity's free will, and the inherent dignity of human nature, rather than the inherent depravity.

These ideas were theologically divisive. During the first four decades of the nineteenth century, hundreds of congregational churches fought over these ideas of

sin and salvation, and especially over the doctrine of the Trinity, the idea the God is father, son, and holy spirit. Most of the churches split over these issues, and a legal ruling in 1820 gave the Unitarians much of the church property. This is why we have so many great old churches on the East Coast.

Just the year before, in 1819, the Reverend William Ellery Channing famously preached his rejection of the idea of the Trinity, his belief in human goodness, and his assertion that theology must be subject to the application of REASON. This sermon, "Unitarian Christianity," was published in pamphlet form and read by thousands of people.

In 1825, the American Unitarian Association was formed.

Now, you must understand, both denominations were still deeply Christian. Although the Universalists' vision of salvation was radically inclusive, we were, in most other ways, theologically conservative. We Universalists recognized the authority of the Christian bible, the divinity of Jesus, and the need for atonement for one's sins.

Unitarianism was similarly conservative, focused on biblical text and the character of Jesus. Unitarians debated the meaning and significance of the miracles performed by Jesus. The transcendentalist ideas of Unitarian minister Ralph Waldo Emerson created a controversy in the new denomination. The idea that one could experience God DIRECTLY and that the bible and its teachings were largely irrelevant, were threatening. We take these ideas for granted NOW, but it took decades for us Unitarians to embrace these ideas.

I won't go into the details of our theological development from the mid-1800s to the mid-1900s. Suffice it to say, our liberal religious traditions became more and more liberal. By the time of the merger of Unitarianism and Universalism in 1961, one of the SIX principles agreed upon at that time was "to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man."

This is the only one of those six principles to reference a specific religious heritage. The principles and sources that are more familiar to us today were not articulated until 1985.

Now, it's easy to claim we're not Christian.

But most of our congregations have some kind of Easter celebration. And most of our congregations have some kind of Christmas celebration. We worship together on Sunday mornings. And like most Protestants, our worship tends to emphasize the intellectual rather than the mystical or *felt* experience of ritual.

And some of us in the room right now might be BRISTLING at the idea that we have a Christian heritage we still live. Right? If I told you a lot of what we do is really Buddhist or really Hindu, that would be really interesting to learn. We'd be tickled. We'd be delighted. It would be cool.

But our relationship to Christianity is different. It's INTIMATE. It's tender. Christianity is the old boyfriend we don't want to run into, the one we hope is unhappy and sorry for how he treated us. We Unitarians didn't want to be our own

denomination, after all. We wanted everybody else to change their minds and agree with us. We were kicked out.

Our hurt feelings are most evident to me in our approach to our hymns.

Continuing my boyfriend analogy, I'm going to suggest our hymns are the gifts that remind us of the relationship. Maybe a sweater at the back of the closet, a collection of cards and photos kept in a box. We can't bring ourselves to get rid of them, and we can't bring ourselves to enjoy them.

Our grey hymnal is a motley collection of hymns we refuse to sing, hymns we only want to sing if we can change the words, hymns we approach with suspicion and, subsequently, sing tentatively, and a small handful of beloved hymns that we sing over and over. These beloved hymns tend to lack any explicitly Christian reference. We might gladly sing hymns from a variety of faith traditions, but not Christianity.

We enjoy the hymn "Morning Has Broken," I think—I do—but is it because we embrace what it's saying? Or is it because we ignore what it's saying? The hymn compares the beauty of this morning to the beauty of God's first creation of the Garden of Eden, and it makes specific reference to the Word, with a capital "W." That's a reference to Jesus, the word of God made flesh.

"Be Thou My Vision" maybe feels more challenging, with its old fashioned language and its adoration and praise of God, not God's creation. Its lyrics have been changed from the original version, to change the male language of "Lord" and "King" to the gender-neutral language of "God" and "Sovereign" and to eliminate

altogether language of God as father.

Our final hymn will be “Amazing Grace.” My grandmother’s favorite hymn, and I’m not sure if I’ve ever sung it in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. If I have, I think it was just once in the past seven years. Our hymnal includes four verses, rather than the full six.

These are the gifts. We can’t bring ourselves to get rid of them, and we can’t bring ourselves to enjoy them.

Our relationship to Christianity is different from our relationship to any other tradition. It’s INTIMATE. It’s tender.

And I think it’s time we got over our hurt feelings. It’s time to wish this boyfriend well, to feel glad to see him when we run into him, and to appreciate that we’ve been happier since the break up. It’s time to enjoy our hymns for what they are and to quit over-analyzing them. Like old photos, they remind us of the past, and it’s a past we CAN and SHOULD remember fondly.

I want to suggest that the best way to understand our relationship to Christianity is to understand ourselves, at least in part, as being a post-Christian religious tradition. I wouldn’t want that to be the only way we define ourselves, but I think it’s the best way of understanding ourselves in relationship to our theological past.

The term “post-Christian” was first used, as far as I can tell, by radical feminist theologian Mary Daly. She began using the term in the early 1970s to describe herself, to acknowledge the religious tradition she came from and rejected.

To me, the term “post-Christian” embraces the past even as it moves us forward. We aren’t Christian now, but we used to be.

If we can make peace with our Christian heritage, if we can move past our hurt feelings, then we might be able to re-engage with aspects of Christianity that could be meaningful to us. We’ve rejected the idea of God as judge, and the idea of the afterlife as a time and place of reward or punishment. Good riddance, I say. But we also lost our respect for the teachings of the Jewish social justice activist, Jesus of Nazareth. We lost the language for talking about sin and evil and salvation. We lost the ability to acknowledge our own suffering and our need, at times, for forgiveness.

And perhaps most debilitating of all, we’ve lost our connections with the liberal branches of Christianity. Not all Christians are fundamentalists. Not all Christians are intolerant of differences. We need to build strong interfaith alliances among the liberal branches of ALL faith traditions to combat the evils of this world: corporate greed, social injustice, violence, and governance by fear.

In trying to forget our Christian heritage, we’ve lost too much.

I won’t be making the Lord’s Prayer part of my daily spiritual practice. Probably not even my weekly practice. But I AM going to be sure to say it from time to time. It reminds me of going to church with my family, of spending Easter Sunday with my grandma, of the curious child I once was. It’s part of who I am. The prayer is a snapshot from my childhood, and I can treasure it as such.

I hope that our worship today is an invitation to you, as well, to explore our

Christian heritage in a new way.

May it be so. Amen.

BENEDICTION

Our closing words come from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true,
whatever is honorable,
whatever is just,
whatever is pure,
whatever is pleasing,
whatever is commendable,
if there is any excellence and
if there is anything worthy of praise,
think about these things.

Amen.