ABC (Anything But Christian)

January 4, 2015

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I

You may (or may not) know that before I became a Unitarian Universalist minister, I was a professor at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

When I joined the faculty at UNC, I decided that, although I hadn’t been a Carolina basketball fan, I should cheer for Carolina’s sports teams since UNC was paying for the house that I lived in. So I learned the Carolina fight song and cheered at Carolina basketball games and bought a light blue Carolina sweatshirt. And, even though it’s more than a little bit embarrassing given the recent disclosure of the long-running academic scandal involving Carolina athletics, I guess I’m still a Carolina fan.

There was a time, however, when I cheered for Duke and my wife, Miriam, is still a true blue Duke fan. Her blood is Duke blue, not red. She watches Duke basketball games on TV *religiously*. And I’m pretty sure she’s convinced that Coach K can walk on water.

Our marriage is a mixed marriage—Carolina and Duke. And, most of the time, that’s OK. Because I’m a Carolina fan who can cheer for Duke when they’re not playing against Carolina and Miriam is a Duke fan who can cheer for Carolina when they’re not playing Duke.

There are, however, some Duke fans who aren’t just Duke fans, but proud and vehement members of the ABC club who will cheer for Anybody But Carolina. (And I’m pretty sure that there are more than a few Wolfpack fans who are members of the ABC club as well.)

But I didn’t come here this morning to talk with you about college sports—about NC State, Duke, or Carolina.

I’m here this morning to talk about a different ABC club—an ABC club that exists in Unitarian Universalist congregations here in North Carolina and all across the United States.

It’s not “anybody but Carolina.”

It’s “anything but Christian.”

II

While it’s true that Unitarian Universalism includes some humanists and atheists who aren’t big fans of religion in general or any religion in particular, many Unitarian Universalists readily accept, and even embrace, Buddhist teachings and spiritual practices, are drawn to the wisdom of Taoism, or find meaning in earth-centered spirituality and neo-pagan rituals.

Unitarian Universalism is, after all, a liberal, tolerant, and theologically diverse faith that supposedly embraces the wisdom, truth, and meaning that is revealed through reason, science, personal experience, literature, poetry, music, art, and *all* of the world’s religions.

When it comes to one particular religion, though, Unitarian Universalists don’t always practice what we preach.

For some Unitarian Universalists, religion is OK—at least in small and harmless doses—as long as it’s “anything but Christianity” because they believe that, like oil and water, Christianity and Unitarian Universalism just “don’t mix” and the only time that the words “Jesus Christ” should be heard in a UU congregation is when some spills hot coffee in her lap during coffee hour.

And, to me, that’s really, really sad.

III

It’s sad and I wish it wasn’t so.

But I do understand why some Unitarian Universalists are as allergic to Christianity as vampires are to crosses.

One reason is that many of us who grew up in a traditional, conservative Christian church, decided, at some point in our lives, to leave because it was too dogmatic and oppressive. It just didn’t work for us. It didn’t make sense.

That was certainly true for me. As a teen and young adult, I simply couldn’t reconcile what I was taught in Sunday school with what my mind and heart told me was true. I couldn’t, in good faith, say the prayers and creeds or believe what I thought I was expected to believe.

But there’s also, I believe, a second reason that some UUs are such loyal members of the ABC club. It’s because some Christians have given Christianity a bad name.

If Christianity means what the late pastor Fred Phelps of the “God Hates Fags” Westboro Baptist Church says it means, then I don’t want anything to do with it. If Christianity means believing that a supernatural God created the world a few thousand years ago in less than a week and then scattered fossils that appear to be millions of years old all around to throw us off track, then I just can’t buy it.

But that’s *not* what Christianity is and that’s *not* what *all* Christians believe.

I know—because I happen to be married to a practicing Christian—an Episcopal priest who is a smart, rational, compassionate, caring, and beautiful human being who would have no problem whatsoever in affirming each and every one of our seven Unitarian Universalist principles.

IV

Unitarian Universalists too often forget (or perhaps choose to ignore) the fact that our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors—Michael Servetus, Francis David, John Murray, Hosea Ballou, William Ellery Channing, Thomas Starr King, and others—were liberal Christians:

* Christians who didn’t believe everything that other Christians believed;
* Christians who were branded as heretics and sometimes burned at the stake by other Christians;
* Christians who refused to believe that reason and faith are incompatible;
* Christians who were more concerned with what Jesus said than what others said about Jesus.

Unitarianism and Universalism were, historically speaking, liberal Christian denominations, firmly rooted in the tradition of liberal Christianity.

Unitarians and Universalists, however, were never traditional or orthodox Christians. From the beginning, they boldly pushed the “theological envelope” of Christianity further and further until they created a new, distinctive, and theologically diverse religious faith—Unitarian Universalism—that welcomes atheists, agnostics, humanists, and skeptics as well as liberal Christians, Buddhists, pagans, mystics, and theists.

Over time, Unitarian Universalism has evolved “beyond” Christianity. We’re not “just” Christians and never have been “just” Christians in the same way that fundamentalist, evangelical, or mainstream Christians are Christian.

Unitarian Universalism has evolved “beyond” Christianity. But that doesn’tmean that Christianity is no longer a part of our religious DNA and identity as Unitarian Universalists. It doesn’t mean that Christianity is simply a useless, obsolete relic of our history. It doesn’tmean that the term “UU Christian” is an oxymoron. And it doesn’t means that religious language, stories, and practices are OK in UU congregations as long as the religion is “anything but Christian.”

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is a “living” tradition—a liberal religious faith that grows and changes over time. Like a tree, we are always sprouting new branches and leaves that reach upward and outward, growing toward the sun and sky above. But, like a tree, it is our roots that anchor, nourish, and sustain us.

And so, when we claim that, like oil and water, Christianity and Unitarian Universalism simply don’t mix, we’re cutting off one of the roots of the living tradition that anchors, nourishes, and sustains our liberal religious faith.

When we deny that Jewish and Christian teachings that call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves are one of the sources of our living tradition, we’re being untrue to our history, denying where we came from and who we are.

And when we’re unwilling to consider Christianity as a source of truth or meaning in our lives or close our ears and minds and hearts to others simply because they’re Christians, we’re being untrue to our values as religious liberals.

V

When I preached a sermon on humanism last year at the UU congregation on Wade Avenue, I told them that I was a card-carrying humanist—a member in good standing of the UU Humanist Association.

And it’s true. I *am* a humanist.

But I’m also a card-carrying member of the UU Christian Fellowship.

I’m a UU humanist *and* a UU Christian.

Maybe that means that I suffer from multiple personality disorder.

Maybe it means I’m just confused.

Or maybe it means I’m a Unitarian Universalist whose faith draws from both Christianity and humanism.

“Christian” is not my theological identity of choice. And so, if and when I call myself a Christian (which is not very often), I usually say that I’m a “small ‘c’ christian.”

And what I mean by that is that I’m not a Christian in the same way that my wife, Miriam, is a Christian (though I believe that my faith and hers are not too very different).

I’m not a Christian in the same way that Rev. William Barber is a Christian (though I admire and respect the way his faith calls him to work for justice and community).

And I’m certainly not a Christian in the same way that Pat Robertson or Billy Graham are Christians.

What I mean when I call myself a “small ‘c’” christian is that I *don’t* believe that Jesus was God, that his mother was a virgin, that he walked on water and raised the dead. I’m saying that I *don’t* believe that he rose from the dead on Easter morning, that he is my personal savior, or that he is the one and only way, truth, and light.

What I mean when I call myself a “small ‘c’” christian is that I’m not willing to throw out the baby with the bath water—that I want to reclaim and hold onto those aspects of my childhood Christian faith that still have meaning and value in my life.

What I mean when I call myself a “small ‘c’” christian is that I’m more concerned with *what Jesus taught*—how to live rightly, treating others with kindness, compassion, and love—*than who Jesus was*.

The religion that Jesus taught is about loving our neighbors (which is hard enough) and loving our enemies (which is even harder). It’s about feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, putting principle above wealth and power, accepting those who are different, showing mercy, and seeking justice.

And so, as a “small ‘c’” christian, Christianity is about *how* we should live, not *what* we must believe about God or Jesus. And, believe it or not, the same is true for many “capital ‘C’” liberal Christians (like Miriam and Rev. Barber).

VI

Scotty McLennan is an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister who proudly identifies himself as a UU Christian. For many years, McLennan served as the chaplain at Tufts University and is the real-life model for the character, Rev. Scot Sloan, in the popular comic strip, *Doonesbury*, by Garry Trudeau.

In his book, *Jesus Was a Liberal*, McLennan argues that Jesus was a liberal because he championed rationality, tolerance, and freedom from religious authority. And another UU minister, Bob Janis-Dillon, claims that Jesus was actually a Unitarian Universalist—or at least embodied many of the values that Unitarian Universalists hold near and dear.

Like Unitarian Universalists, Jesus was someone who had little use for dogma and questioned religious authority. He and his disciples broke the rules of their religion and society by not washing their hands before they ate, eating grain that they picked while walking through the fields on the Sabbath, and healing lepers on the Sabbath, and challenging the religious orthodoxy of his day.

Like us, Jesus practiced tolerance and inclusivity, hanging out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners, including women within his inner circle of disciples, refusing to condemn a woman who accused of adultery, and insisting that, by caring for a wounded man on the road, a Samaritan was more holy than a Jewish priest.

Like us, Jesus was concerned with social justice in the here and now, preaching a gospel of radical egalitarianism, hospitality, compassion, and justice for all—especially the poor, the sick, widows and orphans, strangers and immigrants, the weak and vulnerable, and those on the margins of society.

VII

I didn’t come here this morning to ask you to cheer for Carolina or Duke or Jesus.

If you’re a fan of humanism or atheism, cheer for humanism or atheism.

If you’re a UU pagan or Buddhist, cheer for the Goddess or the Buddha.

If you’re a “small ‘c’ christian,” cheer for Jesus. And if you’re not, then don’t.

But I hope you’ll remember that being a good Duke or NC State fan doesn’t mean you have to cheer for “anybody but Carolina.”

And I hope that we’ll come to understand that being a Unitarian Universalist doesn’t mean being tolerant and open to other religious faiths—as long as they are “anything but Christian.”