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## **What It Might Be Good For Everyone to Know About Christianity**

**Mark Belletini**

### **Opening Words**

We are here,  
*after the first snowfall of the season,*  
to celebrate our lives together,  
*to clarify both our memories and hopes,*  
by the light of reason, history and experience,  
*and at the same time to heal our hearts,*  
by the soothing warmth at our deepest center:  
*the fire of compassion. And so,*

**Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.**

### **Sequence**

Silence, not simply being quiet.  
Silence, not breathing more shallowly.  
Silence, not focused meditation.  
Silence, not contemplative prayer.  
Silence, not a sense of being stifled.  
Silence, not a vacuum without any noise at all.  
Silence, not some sign of holiness.  
Silence, not a symbol of perfection.  
Silence, not a denial of passion.  
Silence, not the fruit of shock or sorrow.  
Silence, not the mere cessation of these words  
in this house of life dusted with falling snow.

Silence.

### *Silence*

Silent day, silent night, a thread of silence  
runs through all the noise and noshes,  
through all the promises and priorities...  
the silent connection, tight as our own ligaments,  
binding us across the miles to those who  
challenge us, who love us, who invite our love  
and respect, who invite our best memories...  
silently we name them to ourselves,  
or whisper their names quietly into the morning.

### *Naming*

Silence rests at the beginning of all things,  
the nest of the universe, the cradle of time...  
and then, the strange and wonderful music  
we call the universe bursts from the womb of virginal silence, and the  
cosmos, like a gleaming child, was born...

**Anthem: For Unto Us a Child is Born...**

### **Readings For the Day**

*The First Reading* comes from the book ***Our Passion for Justice*** written by the Rev. Carter Heyward, an Episcopal priest, and a professor at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge MA. She gave one of the finest talks I've ever heard at our Unitarian Universalist annual General Assembly about 15 years ago.

The more theology reflects the specific and particular experience of those who shape it, the more credible theology is to others, especially to honest seekers. Good, constructive theology is done within concrete situations, in which the doers of theology speak for and about themselves rather than for

and about others, or humanity in general, by attempting to universalize their experiences of what is true or good.

The predominance of Christian dogma has been articulated by men who have reflected on the meaning and value of their experiences as the experiences of *all* men and *all* women. A similar presumption has been made by white people (most often men) who have attempted to articulate the theological meaning and value of the lives of people of color. These presumptions fly implicitly under the banners of such assumptions as objectivity, value-free theorizing, bipartisan interest, and revelation. It is specifically in response to this error that white women and black men and women have suggested that God is, in fact, our mother or the goddess or that the messiah is black. What this means is that theology must be done modestly, in recognition that all theological images and patterns are limited by the boundaries of the life experiences of those who construct them.

*The Second Reading, from a most excellent article, What Fundamentalists Need for Their Salvation by David James Duncan, can be found in the August issue of the magazine, Orion.*

To refer to Celtic monks and fundamentalist lobbyists, Origen of Alexandria and Oral Roberts of Tulsa, the Desert Fathers and Jerry Falwell, Dante and Pat Robertson, St. Francis and the TV “prosperity gospel” hucksters, Lady Julian of Norwich and Tim LaHaye, or John of the Cross and George W. Bush all as Christian stretches the word so thin its meaning vanishes. The term “carbon-based life-form” is as informative.

Though it may shock those who equate fundamentalism and Christianity, ninety years ago the word “fundamentalist” did not exist. The term was coined by an American Protestant splinter-group, which in 1920 proclaimed that adhering to “the literal inerrancy of the Bible” was the true Christian faith. The current size of this group does not change the aberrance of its stand: deification of the mere words of the Bible, in light of every scripture-based wisdom tradition *including Christianity’s two-thousand-year-old own*, is not just naïveté, it is idolatry.

**Sermon**

Earlier this year, when I spoke of both Judaism and Islam, there were a few folks in the congregation who were raised within these two traditions. I mean *just* a few.

But as I speak of Christianity today, I am well aware that there are many more people in this room who were raised within some form of the Christian tradition. Which means that the response to this sermon just has to be different from the first two. More intense, perhaps. Or even a more cautious approach.

I am also well aware as I preach that, for me, the actual word “Christian” feels as if it’s been hijacked for about the last 30 years. Every day I experience examples of how the word has been claimed, *exclusively*, by loud, media-savvy preachers who seem to have fused their own Christian theology to a terrifying right-wing political ruthlessness. And because this is so personally painfully to me, I fear I may even have difficulty myself this morning, hearing my own reasonable voice today. I may have trouble hearing it over the clamor of certain mega-church preachers condemning me and all of us in this room to eternal torture in hell.

Worse, I am preaching this sermon right smack dab in the middle of the Christmas season. The nasty public discourse about Christmas I’ve witnessed this year certainly supports my conviction that the ancient word Christian has been thoroughly hi-jacked by a few shrill voices. These are the voices claiming, quite ridiculously in my judgment, that Christmas is theirs and theirs alone to celebrate, and that it’s not some stupid holiday among many other holidays,” but **Christmas**. Never mind that the introduction of the ubiquitous Christmas tree in this nation was sponsored by a Unitarian minister from Massachusetts. Never mind that it was our Universalist ancestors who first celebrated Christmas openly in a land where the Puritan Christians used to *fine* people who celebrated it. Never mind that it was the Unitarian Charles Dickens who best expressed the spirit of the season with his famous *A Christmas Carol*, or that many of the songs associated with the season, especially carols like *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*, were written

by Unitarians. Or Universalists. Or even Ethical Cultural humanists like Percival Chubb. Never mind all that.

The cultural conflict this Christmas has achieved a level of foolishness which leaves me breathless.

And furthermore, this sermon may prove difficult for some because I am aware our own religious practice is clearly rooted in our own liberal Christian heritage. Only since the Humanist Controversy in the 1930's did most of us turn the adjectives *Unitarian* and *Universalist* into nouns because we could no longer in good faith claim to be Christian. Even so, you very well know I am not called a rabbi or imam. And today is Sunday, the traditional meeting day of Christians since the second century. These facts can certainly confuse people both within and outside our fold.

Thus, you may understand quite clearly now that the stakes are higher this morning than they were for the first two sermons in this series.

Now all of this means there are a thousand things I should say, ten thousand things I *could* say. But I have only a little time, so there will much more left unsaid than said.

So since that is true, I need to get to the essence of it all right away. I am telling you that all three sermons in this series are essentially the same sermon anyway, a single statement. Carter Heyward made that statement in the first reading:

*Good, constructive theology, she wrote, is done within concrete situations, in which the doers of theology speak for, and about, themselves, rather than for, and about, others, or humanity in general, by attempting to universalize their experiences of what is true or good.*

That's a complex sentence. Let me verbally underline the main ideas in it. Each of us is called to speak for ourselves, she says, not speak *for* others. Nor speak *about* others without any experience or knowledge. And not one of us is called to claim that our own experience is *the universal experience*.

In other words, *my* experience of Christianity is *not* “Christianity.” And your experience of Christianity is not “Christianity.” No personal experience is, or even can be, universal, despite the reality that we are all human mortals.

If that does not make sense to you, then nothing else I say will make sense, this morning. It’s fair to say that upfront so that no one expects something that I am not going to say.

Our second reading, with words by David Duncan, supports what Carter Heyward affirms in a very wonderful way. Here is the crucial passage:

*To refer to Celtic monks and fundamentalist lobbyists, Origen of Alexandria and Oral Roberts of Tulsa, the Desert Fathers and Jerry Falwell, Dante and Pat Robertson, St. Francis and the TV “prosperity gospel” hucksters, Lady Julian of Norwich and Tim LaHaye, or John of the Cross and George W. Bush all as Christian stretches the word so thin its meaning vanishes. The term “carbon-based life-form” is as informative.*

Exactly. For instance, the word “Christian,” just a few short decades ago, had only two meanings that I know of, a general one...referring to all people belonging to the circle of Christendom as a whole, all the way from Greek Orthodox to Quaker...and a narrow one, referring to the specific denomination called the Disciples of Christ, founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century here in the States. They used to call themselves Campbellites, after their founder, but in the mid-twentieth century, they simply called themselves “The Christian Church.” Their symbol is a chalice too, but with a slanted red cross within it. There are, however, only a million of them, a mere drop in the bucket of all Christendom.

So today I hear televangelists claiming there are at least one hundred million people in this country who are Christians...the only real Christians at that. From my observation, these modern Christians seem to worship quite differently, both in culture, style, and theology, from the Disciples of Christ, who serve communion every Sunday.

I once attended the ordination of a friend at a Christian Church, by which I mean a Disciples of Christ church. It was beautiful. Unless I am way out of line, I really believe that almost anyone in this room would have found things to appreciate in that ceremony, had you been there. The singing. The sacred dance. The magnificent sermon. And the communion ceremony in that congregation was so inclusive, so welcoming, so without reference to either sacrifice or blood, that several of my Jewish friends felt perfectly at home in eating the symbolic bread and taking the wine.

However, I don't think I have to tell you that if a grinning Pat Robertson or this present Pope started offering bread and wine to my Jewish friends, or me, we would run so fast in the other direction we would set new Olympic records for speed.

But what I am saying is that Pat Robertson does not get to define Christianity for me, nor for you, just because he's rich as Midas and can buy and sell television stations like you and I buy paper plates. Neither does the Pope, just because he wears impressive robes, and heads the single largest Christian body in the world. Neither television, nor size and silken vesture are signs of true authority for me. Those of us who are Unitarian Universalists have always claimed the right of authority for our individual selves, each of us using a combination of our reason, our experience, our study, our relationships and our community as touchstones.

At this point, I need to review here a bit of what I said in the sermon I gave on Judaism back in October. The modern Jewish and modern Christian communities were both born at the same time. Around the year 70 of our era. Before that year, Jews were simply Hebrews living in the Roman province of Judea. Their geography eventually lent them their name...Judean slowly became the word Jew. And Christians were not called Christians for decades after Jesus died...even the New Testament makes that clear...St. Paul never once uses the term. The people who eventually became Christians were largely Greek-speaking people who joined the Hebrew religious tradition abroad, but in a translated form, one where even the Hebrew language was no longer used, and Greek was the language of worship. When the Romans destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70, the people we now call the

Jews were those who maintained the Hebrew content of the religion, but without the required sacrifices of animals, since the locus of such sacrifice, the temple, was now a heap of rubble. And the people who were called the Christians, who had not been sacrificing animals for a long time, because they lived so far from the Temple, were those who agreed with the metaphor that Jesus himself, God's own lamb, ended the sacrificial system anyway, and that the temple wasn't important anymore.

But please, I am not telling you there was once "an early church," some pure original form of Christianity which then slowly divided into the zillion denominations we know...and mostly don't know... today. No, from the beginning, it was always *churches*, not "The Church." There were liberals and conservatives, to use modern terms, right from the get go. Middle of the roaders. Radicals. Fringe folks. Some early Christians joined the Plato-quoting Greeks in respecting limits on sexual expression; others, like the Carpocratians, practiced sex as a sacrament.

Some early Christians, like our own Universalist ancestor, Origen of Alexandria, were students of Greek philosophy, while others were more interested in living out a critique of the social order of Rome, where slavery and ritual murder in the arenas were acceptable, and where the sexes and classes were kept at odds most of the time.

One thing is certain. There were no early Christians who resembled any of these TV guys at all. Or any of the mega-church preachers. There were no gold-edged Bibles in those pre-printing press days. There was no one going around calling themselves "conservative evangelicals." There was no such thing as Christian "rock," and nothing like either Amazing Grace or Rock of Ages. And there was certainly no one going around saying "I accept Christ as my Lord and Savior." No, not one. No one.

True, people certainly addressed Jesus as Lord and Savior during worship, but that was because they were contrasting, quite provocatively I'd say, the poor Galilean teacher with the all-powerful Emperor, whom everyone else already called Lord and Savior. By using such sharp language, they were sticking their finger in the Empire's eye.



I don't think that is exactly what is going on now, when Uncle Bill invites you with tears in his eyes to accept Christ at your family reunion. And of course, having been raised Roman Catholic, I, with all the Eastern Orthodox, the Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, etc, never "accepted" Christ as my Lord and Savior. That phrase is late, local and entirely Protestant in its origins. And most Christians in the world are not Protestant. In all the world, for example, there are only 16 million Southern Baptists, most of them here in the States. But there are almost a billion and a half Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians. Strangely, by my lights at least, there seem more Jehovah's Witnesses than there are Anglicans, and far more Assemblies of God congregations than all the Latter Day Saints, or Mormons, lumped together and squared. And certainly the early churches used no such words as Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, or Adventists. All of those denominations are, at best, 150 years old, and very Anglo-American in character. They represent drastic changes in doctrine and style from the wide stream of Christian history. Theological cul-de-sacs, you might say.

And, Christian history changed even more drastically in the twentieth century. In the Second Reading, Duncan reminds us that the idea of Fundamentalism is a new, and quite aberrant (that is, abnormal), form of the Christian tradition.

But no one should be surprised that drastic and unexpected change occurs in history, religious or otherwise. It's the very nature of history, of life itself.

And Christian history has changed in every era, in every age. The fifth century autobiographer Augustine of Hippo, who invented the bad idea of original sin, was a Christian, but so was Dorothea Day, the great social activist of our century. What do they have in common? Not much. Pat Robertson denounces Islam almost every day on his *700 Club* TV show...and Franklin Graham, Billy's son, foams at the mouth against Islam, every time I have heard him speak. Yet the Christian man we told our children about this morning, St. Francis, actually exchanged views respectfully with Malik, the Sultan of Egypt. And he tried to get the Christian crusaders to sign an armistice, which the Muslim Malik was willing to sign, but which the Christian Crusader leaders refused, to the eternal

embarrassment of Francis. The Sultan was delighted with Francis, and offered him many gifts, all of which Francis refused, except for a kind of horn used back then to call the people to prayer (along with the famous chant). He used this horn all of his life once he got back to Italy. And he urged his fellow Christians to bow like the Muslims did when they prayed. He thought it was a beautiful gesture, and was not at all ashamed to add that gesture to his gospel-based Christian practice of working for the poor and marginalized.

And the history I read shows me millions of Christians like St. Francis... from Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothea Day, and Sor Juana de la Cruz, to Mother Waddles, Bishop Spong, Mathew Fox, Thomas Kelly, Peter Waldo, Hadjewich, Meister Eckhart, John the Scot Erigena, Marguerite Porete, Beatrice of Nazareth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, our own William Ellery Channing, and so many of the pastors here in Columbus I have come to know and love through our Interfaith BREAD organization.

Sure, I know about the crusades and the inquisition. I know about the witch burnings and the heretics at their stake. But to define a whole tradition by its cruel side without looking at its sublime side is to have accepted the absolute rule of fundamentalism as your own, even if you claim to not be a Christian in any way. And that absolute rule is to regard evil and good as separate, and to count ones self always among the righteous, and to damn everyone else based on the cruelty of a few, a cruelty assigned to the whole institution which you then damn for all time. It's a larger version of the idea I presented at the beginning of this sermon, my basic sermon that no one can honestly universalize from a single experience without doing violence to reality itself. To define the word Christian in the way Pat Robertson does, or as the present Pope does, or even as your fanatical and unpleasant uncle Bill does at the holiday family table, is to be defeated already, and to throw away your well-earned Unitarian Universalist privilege to decide for yourself what is right, what is true, what is noble, and what is not, and to not let someone else do that for you.

Now no Christian used the well-known symbol of the cross until about 400 years after Jesus died. Many Christian groups never used it through history.

It always had the body on it, alive, triumphant and dressed in finery, until the Reformation, when the body was removed among Protestant congregations, the cross alone remaining. But even in the Roman church, the body was not a dead body until the time of the plague in Europe, when Christians wanted desperately to understand that God had suffered too. But I find the cross, with or without a body, to be an intriguing symbol anyway. It says what the Buddhists say to me, that suffering is so much a part of life that even if there is a god, that god too must suffer. It also says to me that whenever self-anointed authorities try to nail down something good until it doesn't move or breathe any more, that act will ultimately fail. That which has been nailed down and killed will subsequently rise again, and live with a life that is not recognizable... even by supposedly close friends.

Although I am certain Jesus was actually crucified by the Romans, the story as it is now told is a parable, an interpretation, not the report of a miracle. It's a poem, not a doctrine. It's a powerful image for the heart, not spoon-fed pabulum for someone who has yet to grow up. And I kind of like it, actually.

So I'd like to think that the more progressive ancient Christian traditions might also someday rise again to fresh insight as our century moves forward. I'd like to think that the anomalies that have distorted Christian values these last thirty years in our nation will slowly come to an end, and that this present period in American religious history will be remembered as a particularly unsavory time, something akin to the civil war era.

In any case, the cross of Christendom, and the chalice of Unitarian Universalism will always exist side by side. This painting of the cross and the chalice, which hangs in the chapel of our own UU congregation in Albuquerque, proclaims that reality quite beautifully, I think. For the relationship is real, very personal. It's also historical, and thus cannot be ignored. May we each, whatever our individual relationship to the Christian traditions, remember that whatever we accept or reject from those traditions will best come, not from our reaction, nor our fear or disappointment, but from our care and our reason and our tough but thorough love, both for self and others.

## Offering:

The state does not support us. Our offices in Boston don't support us. There are no oil wells

in our back yard, nor bank vaults in the basement.

Only we support ourselves. For we are the congregation. It's us or no one.

We set aside this time every Sunday to remind ourselves of that simple and beautiful reality. We are the ones who are responsible.

## Prayer

*This Prayer is one of the few authentic things written by Giovanni di Bernardone, whom we now call by his nickname, Francis of Assisi. It's simply his way of trying to struggle with the idea of ultimacy, or the divine. He's not asking for anything. He's just expressing himself. It's a remarkable set of words. By the way, the prayer almost always associated with St. Francis... "Where there is hatred, let me sow love, etc" dates only from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and although we do not know who composed it, we know for sure it wasn't Francis of Assisi.*

You are what we mean when we say Love.

And you are the wisdom of the wise;

***You are humility, too, and patience.***

***You are beauty and humility,***

***yet You are what we mean by security too!***

You are what we call inner peace.

But you are joy, too, yes, hope and joy;

You are justice itself.

***And moderation. You are all the value in what we value, and yes, you are enough for us.***

You are our strength when we are strong,

our refreshment when we are thirsty;

***You are our hope; You are our faith, You are our charity.***

You are everything that is sweet in this life. Amen.