

Beyond Tolerance: Being a Christian & Pagan Community
February 17, 2008
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Unitarian Universalism is a unique religion in many ways. But one of the things about us that is most unusual is our theological openness—that you can come here and be a Christian, or an atheist, or a Pagan, or many other things, and we won't try to convert you, and we want you here in your differentness, and we believe we grow from the experience of being all these things together.

Yet, at the same time, no part of our being together in this beloved community is probably more difficult, sometimes, than coming together across these theological boundaries. As I talked about Humanism in an earlier sermon, I wanted to focus on two of these faiths that make up our church body, and what they have to say to each other, about each other, and what they can learn from each other. I picked Paganism and Christianity, because they exemplify how our religious traditions can be seemingly at odds, and yet so complimentary.

Christianity is the roots of our tradition. The Universalists were a Christian denomination, and the Unitarians were a Christian denomination. So Christianity is very much a part of who we are. It's in our very fiber. If you look at our church building, it's built on a Christian model of what a house of worship looks like. If you look at our order of service, it very much resembles a Christian order of service, and many of the words are the same. The songs in our hymnal are, many of them, old Christian tunes with new words or with word changes, or sometimes intact.

Yet, despite all this, I have heard people say, in Unitarian Universalist churches, that they don't understand why Christians want to be in a UU church. Their attitude is that there are all those other churches for that, this is something different, so Christians should just leave and go to an exclusively Christian church. Add to that a feeling by many who are ex-Christians that they were in some way wounded by their religious past, as well as the historical fact of the burning times in history when Christians killed witches by the thousands, and you can see where we might have a little trouble coming together as one religious community.

And then, on the other extreme, perhaps, there's Paganism, by which I mean earth-centered traditions, and primarily Wicca. This is the newest thread in our tapestry of faith. Paganism came into our movement really in the 1980s. The first known gathering of UU Pagans to organize as a movement, according to the Covenant of UU Pagans, was in 1985.¹ The first version of our principles and purposes didn't include the source that was added later listed as one of our religious sources, "Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature." That was added in 1993. But it is firmly part of our movement now, with the addition of the sixth source to our principles, and with the formation of the CUUPS organization, with chapters in about seventy churches in the Unitarian Universalist Association, and many more private individuals in churches without a chapter.

¹ David Burwasser, "A Brief History of CUUPS," Ed. Jerrie Hildebrand, 1996-1997, <http://www.cuups.org/content2/aboutcuups/history.php>

So Paganism is a newer addition to Unitarian Universalism, and it's not without its critics. I have heard people say that they're uncomfortable with Paganism in Unitarian Universalist churches. Most of the discomfort has to do with a sort of "what will the neighbors think?" problem—people already think Unitarian Universalism is pretty weird. What will they think of it if they know it includes witches, something many people associate with the occult and the devil?

So there we have it. For each important branch of our religious tree, we have Unitarian Universalists who wonder why it is included. And understanding why they are included means coming to the point where we first tolerate, but then move beyond tolerance to inclusion and then to pluralism until we finally become the beloved community we've envisioned.

What then, do we do? I believe the purposes of a church is to build the beloved community. In some religions the focus is on the beloved community as heaven, as afterlife. We try, in our Unitarian Universalist churches, to build the beloved community here on earth. It is the goal that we are striving towards. Part of what it means for us to live in beloved community in Unitarian Universalism, I believe, has to do with how we build the beloved community across our differences, how we come together with the "other." Other churches begin by limiting themselves to a certain belief—then they can have differences of race, class, national origin, even sexual orientation. But we start somewhere else. We start with that goal in mind, and our goal of beloved community has a radical inclusiveness.

Last weekend I was at a conference in Chicago called "Can We Build the Beloved Community through Political Action?" The speaker, Dr. Melissa Harris-Lacewell offered four models of how we often come together across racial, gender, or any other barriers. The first model is tolerance. As she put it, tolerance assumes a normative person who will do the tolerating of the "other." When we think of the word "tolerance" we quickly see it's limitations. When you say something is "tolerable," it's not an enthusiastic statement; it's not a statement that something is ideal, or even desired. It's just something that you can live with.

The next model is inclusion. Many UU churches stop here at this point, Harris-Lacewell argues. It's where we are when we say, "How do we get more of those people of that group to join us." It still assumes a dominant group that magnanimously includes the minority.

The third model is pluralism. This is one that is being embraced by many right now. Indeed, the organization "Religioustolerance.org" themselves talks about not just tolerance but pluralism.

Author and theologian Diana Eck, founder of the Pluralism Project at Harvard, writes: Pluralism and plurality are sometimes used as if they were synonymous. But plurality is just diversity, plain and simple -- splendid, colorful, maybe even threatening. Such diversity does not, however, have to affect me. I can observe diversity. I can even celebrate diversity, as the cliché goes. But I have to *participate* in pluralism. In the Elmhurst area of Queens, for example, a New York Times reporter found people from 11 countries on a single floor of an apartment building on Justice Avenue -- all living in isolation and fear -- each certain that they were the only immigrants there. This is diversity to be sure, but it is not pluralism.

Pluralism requires the cultivation of public space where we all encounter one another.²

² Diana L. Eck, "The Challenge of Pluralism", *Nieman Reports* "God in the Newsroom" Issue, Vol. XLVII, No. 2, Summer 1993, http://www.pluralism.org/research/articles/cop.php?from=articles_index

Eck suggests that the places where we encounter pluralism is in interfaith councils, such as the one we have in Jackson that meets this afternoon. I would suggest that as Unitarian Universalists, we begin the experience of living pluralism within our own four walls.

Harris-Lacewell thinks pluralism may not go far enough, because it may not ask enough about power. She suggests that justice requires sacrifice and that living in beloved community may mean that we have to be vulnerable, and thus open ourselves up to the possibility of love. That being said, however, I believe pluralism is a worthy goal for a Unitarian Universalist church seeking to live out beloved community. In living out our principles and in living our religion, I believe they lead us to pluralism.

What does pluralism look like, using these two groups of Paganism and Christianity as an example? There's a song by Dar Williams titled "The Christians and the Pagans" that says, "

So the Christians and the Pagans sat together at the table
Finding faith and common ground the best that they were able
Lighting trees in darkness, learning new ways from the old, and
Making sense of history and drawing warmth out of the cold.³

One way to make sense of things is to look for common ground, as the Dar Williams song points out. It points to the common ground between Christmas and Solstice, the lighting trees in darkness. The Pagan in the song says, "But we love trees, we love the snow, the friends we have, the world we share/And you find magic from your God, and we find magic everywhere." In UU churches, Christians and Pagans are in some ways natural allies—they both share a belief in a divine power, and emphasis on ritual and prayer. Pagans may call it magic and Christians call it miracle, but there is a common belief in the way that God or Goddess works in the world and in people's lives.

Another way of bringing the two faiths together under one roof is the many paths one mountain approach. People who hold this belief believe there is one ultimate source of all, call it God, Goddess, divine being, ground of all being. But there are many paths to knowing this great source of all. For some, Christianity is the path that best fits. For others, Paganism is.

In my own belief, I believe that Jesus was a very important person, and a great religious thinker, and someone who showed us one path towards the divine, out of many paths. He brought a great many things to the search for that ultimate truth that changed the world forever—an emphasis on social justice, for example, and a way of addressing the divine as "Father," that made the deity personal and intimate. For me, the Christian narrative will always be an important touchstone, reference point, and source of wisdom. But it is not the whole story. The wisdom of the Bible, which teaches us in metaphor and parable and story is one way of understanding the ultimate. For me, that's not irreconcilable with my Pagan side. I would say, "Jesus teaches us one way of understanding the Goddess." Paganism, for me, teaches me the experiential side, much as our own Unitarian forefathers Ralph Waldo Emerson and particularly Henry David Thoreau did. We learn the Goddess through text, we learn God through nature, and vice versa. Many paths, one mountain.

This is the hard work we do here in our church to build the beloved community. It's part of that living the belief of Universalism, that all are saved, and living our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This is the radical, new ground we break as

³ Dar Williams, "The Christians and the Pagans," <http://www.guntheranderson.com/v/data/thechris.htm>.

Unitarian Universalists, to live together in religious community across these diverse theological beliefs.

Churches have split into two denominations over big things and small—over indulgences, yes, and over pew taxes, over the trinity, over the ordination of women, baptism for adults or for infants, social issues like slavery and gay rights. Churches have split over individual ministers or building decisions. Just within Methodism, you have the United Methodist Church, the African Methodist Episcopal, the Wesleyan, the Free Methodists, and that's only the beginning. There are lots more. There are over 40 denominations that descend from the thought of John Wesley.⁴ And here we are, in this faith, trying to bring together not just the people who believe in adult baptism only with the people who believe in infant baptism. We're trying to bring together atheists with god-worshippers, with goddess-worshippers. Oy veh. It's really inconceivable, when you put it like that. How audacious! How brazen of us! How bold! How courageous!

I've often said, jokingly, that the world needs to look to Michigan for an understanding of how to live in religious diversity. Here in Michigan we do have the largest Muslim population in the United States,⁵ and we do have a large Christian population here, or so I've been told. Yet we manage to not kill each other, for the most part. Of course, the Muslims and Christians in the United States largely share some of our cultural values—belief in religious freedom being primary to this success. Now, take that a step further, and you see that here in this church, we're a model for our country. We take it a step further to believe that not only, as Diana Eck put it, can we live in the same apartment buildings with each other, but we can build real meaningful community with each other as well.

Ultimately, without Christians in this church, we do not have Unitarian Universalism. The day the last Christian walks out our doors will be the day our faith has died. We need Christians in our midst to share with us that Christianity is not a religion of hate, but a religion of love. We need Christians in our churches to bring with them the centuries of deep theological questioning about the nature of the divine. We need Christians and with them the legacy of social justice from the acts of Jesus to modern-day liberation theologians. We need Christians in our church to teach us to move beyond the literal and into the realm of story and metaphor. Without Christians, we are not Unitarian Universalists, for they ground us not only in our history, but in our very nature.

And, so, too, we need Pagans in our church. If we lost the Pagans in Unitarian Universalism we would lose touch with that sense of the interdependent web, of the rhythms of nature and how important they are to understanding our souls. If we lost the Pagans, we would lose the innovation that comes with a modern tradition trying to understand and interpret traditions lost to the silence of history. Without Pagans, we are not Unitarian Universalists, either.

To the extent that we open our doors wider all the time, to the extent that we can ever hang another ornament on the tree of life, to the extent that we can embrace different beliefs and come together in religious community in love, we are a community that is thriving, growing, deepening. When we cut off a branch, when we close our doors, we become smaller, and we are on the road to death.

There will always be new challenges that will test our limits of acceptance, that push the boundaries of what it means to be Unitarian Universalist. Sometimes we do say “not here,” if the ways are ways of harm, of hurtfulness, of death. But to the paths of good and life, we

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methodism>

⁵ <http://pn.psychiatryonline.org/cgi/content/full/40/2/13-b>

welcome them, for they enlarge our souls, and we become one step closer to becoming our goal:
the beloved community.

May it be so.