

“A RELIGIOUS LIBERAL’S CHRISTMAS”

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INVITE RESPONSES TO ‘CHRISTMAS’

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

He’s a genuinely good man, my evangelical Christian buddy of some thirty years. He doesn’t cheat on his wife or his taxes. He’s yet to kick the family dog. He works hard, loves his son and tells some fairly racy jokes for a born-again Republican.

Since I left the evangelical fold in 1978, Eli (not his real name) and I have kept in touch in spite of our religious and political differences. Egotistical as it may sound, if the nations of the world would show the same commitment to right relations as my bud and I, the world would be a better place. Call it our deep bond of recovering Appalachian redneckism or embarrass us both by calling it love, it totals up to the same thing: friendship. The real deal.

That friendship was stretched taut during the Great Christmas Discourse of 1997. After my unceremonious exit from the fold of the faithful stretched into its second decade, I think Eli finally gave up on re-converting me and decided to take a shot at understanding me. (What a gift, by the way.) And given that I had come back to far Southern Ohio for the holidays, I suppose my good friend thought that Christmas would be as good a time as any to find out what liberal religion is all about. In a most organized, un-Eli fashion, he had written down some things to run by me. He even had a format in mind: question and answer. The Inquisition...uh, conversation, went something like this:

QUESTION: *I've always wondered, you don't believe that the Bible is true, do you?*

ANSWER: *If by "true" you mean literally accurate, as in a collection of writings that contains everything we need to know about life in general, and spirituality in particular, I have to say no.*

How come?

You sure you want to get into this?

I can handle it if you can.

Okay. Because I learned just enough Hebrew and Greek to know that the Bible contradicts itself. Over and over. Because it's clear now that the books of the Bible started out as oral stories that were passed from generation to generation, not eyewitness accounts. Because we know that the scribes who copied down the stories felt free to change them. Because the Bible was created and passed on by people whose theological sophistication told them that the stars were portholes that God used to keep an eye on them at night. Because it makes no sense that the Bible is irrelevant in terms of science, history, physics, medicine, social norms or geography, but is somehow the go-to religious authority in all matters. Because the Bible deserves a better fate than to be high-jacked in order to rationalize everything from reproductive rights to natural disasters to homophobia. Because...well, because in spite of what all those well-meaning preachers, teachers, evangelists and youth leaders told us, Eli, the Bible simply is not the literal Word of God.

Serious stuff. Eli sighed, Twice. Then he recovered, noting somewhat sourly as I recall, that if my answers were going to be as long as that first one, I might get back to Minnesota in time for

Ground Hog's Day. How about I just skip the egghead words and get right to answering the darn questions?

Miffed that my pearls of wisdom went unappreciated, I allowed as how most of the differences between his theology and mind are because of our beliefs about the Bible, so that was why I was so wordy on the first one. He rolled his eyes as his way of saying, whatever, without actually having to say, whatever.

QUESTION: *So, if that's how you look at the Bible, you don't believe in God, right?*

ANSWER: Well, which image of God are you talking about? If you're talking about the fickle God that acts a lot like an insecure, highly dysfunctional father, I have to say that I don't. It all goes back to the Bible, Eli. We're talking about a people whose way of explaining and dealing with life was to create a single God that favored them above all others. (Which, by the way made sense of their various captivities.) But do I have to pledge allegiance to their scientifically-challenged version of God in order to be okay?

Cleared throat and buttock shift on the other side of the booth. "I'm gonna' respond to you after I'm done with the questions, okay?" I gave a nod. He looked at his notes.

QUESTION: *So you probably don't believe in Jesus, right?*

ANSWER: You mean, do I think Jesus was divine? Divine, as in God? Son of God? No.

Based again on what we know about the Bible, Jesus is a mighty murky historical figure. Even the oldest fragments of writings about him have little to tell us. But, if by divine you mean that his life shone with a love that comforts and haunts me, then yes, I believe in Jesus. As one of those "pointy-headed" scholars you tease me about once said, I think

Jesus was and is dangerous. I think he put love above self, and that's always dangerous, whether you think like me or think like you.

Right...said my redneck friend. Not divine, so not part of the...wait a minute...

QUESTION: ...You don't believe in the Trinity, either?

ANSWER: How come you keep asking questions that begin with what I don't believe?

Okay, I'll play along. The answer is no. Back in the three-hundreds there were people who said that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were equal to God, yet separate. (Huh?) And there were plenty of people who thought that it was pure idolatry to make a god of even such a man as Jesus. So they fussed at each other. Guess whose side won?

And another thing, Eli. The few passages that get interpreted as Jesus claiming divinity? There're some of the latest, least credible verses in the Christian scriptures! From what I gather from the texts and the scholars, even Jesus knew he wasn't divine.

It's right about here that Eli, as he later told me, wanted to change tables. Said he just wanted to be at least a few feet away when the lightening bolt pierced my head.

QUESTION: Okay, But, aren't you afraid of what'll happen when you die?

ANSWER: Yep. Only saints and liars aren't afraid of death. Even on my worst days, I'm not particularly energized by the thought of the day I check out.

You know that's not what I'm talking about.

Yeah, I do. Intellectually, I don't know what happens when people die. Shoot, I don't think anybody knows for certain what happens when people die. Unless you count near-death experiences, I don't think the living can answer that question.

I know I could have it all wrong, Eli. Maybe things are black-and-white after all. Maybe the hell I used to preach about in my born-again days will be waiting for me, complete with 24/7 Celine Dion songs and looped showings of *Titanic*.

Or, who knows, maybe the early Universalists were onto something: maybe we all get a pass. Maybe reincarnation is true. Maybe we're matter returning to matter. Dust to dust. Ashes to ashes. Or maybe we just get planted or baked and that's that.

Eli, the difference between us is that you believe certain parts of the Bible hold the clues on this one; you think that we have some conditional control over what happens when we take the old dirt nap. I don't. You think heaven and hell are the only two options, and I think death is the surprise inside the Big Cracker Jack Box of Life.

Silence. Eli asked the server for another cup of coffee. More silence.

One last question.

Shoot.

So why celebrate Christmas if you're not a Christian?

Whoa. Two things are going on in that question. First, there are plenty of us who identify as Christians, just not the kind of Christian you have in mind. Jesus doesn't have to divine to be

relevant. Second, for real, now, how long has it been since Christmas was taken seriously by the American masses as a theological rather than a social and commercial event? We've talked before about how Christmas is the end result of pagan festivals piled onto Jewish holy days piled onto Scandinavian folk tales piled onto church traditions piled onto Wal-Mart. Eli, to borrow from another Unitarian Universalist minister, you could be stark naked and have a bone through your nose and still find joy in Christmas! Look here, sharing a Seder meal doesn't make me a Jew; attending a Kwanza celebration doesn't make me an African American. Here's the deal for me: when the nativity story is freed from all the funky stuff, it's beautiful. It's tender bordering on magical. It's hearing that old story told again. It's singing those old carols again. Christmas is kids. It's lights. It's peace...It's seeing an old friend.

Eli couldn't suppress a small smile, blasphemy and all.

Silence.

So, said I, your turn. Set me straight.

Nah, he said, still smiling a tad. As usual, you gave me a headache after about your third paragraph. You've got your mind made up, and so have I. But I could tell that he wasn't going to leave it that. This was not surrender, just time-out.

You know you didn't win anything here, right? I mean, you don't think I'm supposed to see things your way just because of how you put 'em?

Before I could say something sappy about friendship or respect or tolerance, Eli was looking past me, giving the high sign to our server: Check please. And it's his turn.

Folks, I did very little to punch up the story of the Great Christmas Discourse of 1997. Honestly, that's more or less how things went. I'll save for another time the ongoing encounters in which my friend does the talking while I ask the questions, trust me, "Eli" holds his own. And he cuts me no slack just because I've got a few letters after my name and he doesn't.

LIBERAL RELIGION

INVITE RESPONSE TO 'LIBERAL RELIGION'

As we – the unabashed freethinkers known as the people and minister of Nora Unitarian Universalist Church – begin a new ministry in New Ulm, Christmas is as good a time as any to find out what liberal religion is all about. I'm going to give you the rather folksy, nickel tour of how our church does what has historically been called liberal religion. But I won't stop there, for the rich diversity of our tradition is never more obvious than the various ways we "do" Christmas. First, let's define some terms.

When I say *liberal religion* I'm talking about persons within any tradition – Judaism, Christianity, Islam, etc., as well as those outside organized traditions – who believe that 1. religious truth (small t) comes from many sources, and 2. religion must be adaptable to new truth (small t). One need not be a political liberal to be a religious liberal, but I'd be lying if I told you that the majority of religious liberals aren't Democrats, Greens or independents.

When I say *Unitarian Universalist*, I'm referring to the two denominations that merged in 1961, each with heretical roots in early church councils, religious liberalism in Romania and Poland and, from the late 1700s forward, England. Unitarianism

was born of the belief, based on scripture and reason, that God is one. (This is in contrast to Trinitarianism.) Universalism, also based on scripture and reason, stated that God's love is universal and therefore all souls shall be restored to God. (This is in contrast to the doctrine of hell.)

One need not be a UU to be a religious liberal; lots of people the world over believe that wisdom and spiritual sustenance comes from many sources, as well as religion as an elastic, evolving part of life. But I've yet to meet a UU who is not a religious liberal.

What does liberal religion look like? As the eyes of Nora members and friends roll back in their head in response to hearing this yet again, I believe liberal religion (including Unitarian Universalism) turns on three core values:

1. Religious freedom
2. Religious community
3. Religious activism

The first value, religious freedom, holds that each of us is capable of, and responsible for, building our own theology. The second, religious community, exists to aid each other in the process of testing and living out our beliefs. And, thirdly, we stand by

the notion of religious engagement – directing one's time, talent and treasure in the service other broken people, just like us, living in a broken world, just like us.

You know, love, like God, can mean everything and therefore nothing. But love is the word I choose when talking about why these three core values matter, for freedom, community and justice, important as they are, are means, not ends. The end we religious liberals seek is not unlike that of our more orthodox

friends: Love. At our best, we aim to increase the sum total of love within our lives, our congregations and our world.

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM: THE NICKEL TOUR

But enough about terms. What I want to do now is to invite you to see through my eyes the basic evolution of liberal religion as practiced in my denomination, Unitarian Universalism.

Imagine people gathering to participate in the nightly ritual, say, somewhere in Stone Age England. One woman, who has kindled the ceremonial fire for several years has fallen ill, and a younger woman, her daughter, has been chosen to light that night's fire. Having seen her mother spark the dry leaves for so long now, she knows exactly what to do.

But the daughter, on a whim, decides to start the fire on the northwest corner of the pit, not the southwest as does her mother. Onlookers, accustomed to having the ceremonial flames spread from the southwest are taken aback. This is not how the ritual is done! Surely this young woman knows the proper procedure, think the elders. How dare she flaunt tradition like this!

Now, if this had happened here, Minnesota Nice would've kicked in, and folks would've gone along with the change for just this one time rather than embarrass the poor woman. (At least until they got outside.) But perhaps Stonehenge worshippers were not so kind. One of the elders might have snatched the flint and rock from her hands, then proceeded to kneel at the southwest corner where he began striking flint against rock so that the ritual remained "undefiled".

Goofy as that sounds, New Ulm friends, I suggest that liberal religion was born when the first man or woman began

experiencing doubt and started asking questions. If so, then we're right to think of liberal religion as the impulse to think outside the box, not the property of any one denomination. Call it heresy if you will, but its origins are in the human breast, not the desire to demean tradition. And that way of religion was born the first time somebody asked why religion has to be the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

But that's just conjecture. The rest of the story is not conjecture.

Beginning with the church councils, especially those in the Fourth Century, certain strains of thought were adopted and others were condemned. Creeds were written to distinguish the accepted beliefs from the rejected ones. Dogma was formed to distinguish, in more specific terms, orthodox (small o) theology from heretical theology. The winners continued fashioning what would become Catholicism (recall that the Orthodox and Roman traditions didn't split until 1054 C.E.) while the heretics either kept quiet or moved up the river valleys of Europe.

I could regale you with stories of martyrdom, drop odd names like Faustus Socinius and Michael Servetus or tell you about a short period of time when unitarian (small u) theology was the norm in a small kingdom. But suffice it to say that the heretics who believed that God is one, not three, and those that posited that God's universal love would preclude hell itself, scratched together a few congregations in Eastern Europe from the Fourth Century through the Eighteenth. Enter English Universalism and Unitarianism.

Keep in mind that in England, unitarianism (small u) and universalism (small u) were theological viewpoints long before they were the names for full-blown churches and denominations. We can find traces of unitarian preaching there as early as 1615,

yet some ninety years would pass before the organization of the first Unitarian (capital U) church in England. Similarly, circuit preachers were spreading a universalist message in the early 1700s, but a denomination by that name (capital U) would not take shape

until a hapless, relatively uneducated messenger (John Murray) crossed the ocean to the colonies nearly seventy-five years later. But the two didn't always mix.

The differences were more stark than our modern minds can appreciate:

- In its earliest form – a liberal version of Congregationalism – American Unitarianism did not object to an orthodox reading of the Bible, including the doctrines of heaven and hell, but primarily the doctrine of the Trinity
- In its earliest form – a scant number of New England churches – Universalism did not object to the Trinitarian formula, but primarily the doctrines of heaven and hell

Both were seen as heretical, but for very different (and strongly-held) reasons.

- The Unitarianism that the colonies inherited from England appealed, for the most part, to the intellectual upper classes – Unitarian ministers were expected to attend seminary, chief among them Harvard.
- The Universalism that was imported to the colonies from England was, for the most part, a religious viewpoint that was most popular among working-class folks – very few Universalist ministers had formal education of any kind

Let's keep moving. The American Unitarian Association was founded in 1825, and the Universalist Church in America was organized in 1833. (Their offices were less than a mile apart.) For the Unitarians, this was a formal break from the Congregational Church, and it wasn't always civil. Property was disputed. Tax money was fought over. For the Universalists, it was the formation of a much looser, weaker central body.

Quickly, let's do some name-dropping. On the Unitarian side there was John Adams, Abigail Adams, John Quincy Adams, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, Dorothea Dix, Susan B. Anthony, Louisa May Alcott, Charles Dickens, e.e. cummings, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Milton, Herman Melville, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier...

On the Universalist side there was Benjamin Rush, Clara Barton, Thomas Starr King, Olympia Brown, Mary Livermore, George DeBenneville, George Pullman, P.T. Barnum...

Lord, we like calling the roll of our saints! But we've got to wrap this up. Let me list just some of the most important developments in the history of Unitarian Universalism:

- 1838 – Emerson's "Divinity School Address" and Transcendentalism
- 1840 – Brook Farm (Unitarian utopian community)
- 1841 – Theodore Parker's "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity"
- 1841 – Hopedale Community (Universalist utopian community)
- 1844 – Meadville Lombard Theological School (Unitarians)
- 1852 – Tufts College (Universalists)
- 1856 – St. Lawrence University and Theological School (Universalists)

- 1862 – Universalist Publishing House
- 1863 – Ordination of Olympia Brown (Universalists)
- 1867 – Free Religious Association (assortment of religious liberals)
- 1890 – Universalist churches in Japan
- 1899 – First efforts toward merger of the two denominations
- 1902 – Beacon Press (Unitarians)
- 1917 – First joint youth conference (Unitarians and Universalists)
- 1931 – Second attempt to merge the two denominations
- 1933 – Humanist Manifesto (included Unitarian and Universalist clergy)
- 1939 – Unitarian Service Committee
- 1953 – Liberal Religious Youth (LRY) (Unitarians and Universalists)
- 1956 – Third attempt to merge the two denominations
- 1961 – Unitarian Universalist Association (merger)
- 1964 – First resolution against the Vietnam War
- 1965 – Jim Reeb (UU minister killed during protests in Selma, AL)
- 1966 – Martin Luther King, Jr. speaks at General Assembly
- 1970 – Unitarian Universalist World (denominational magazine)
- 1970 – Officially affirms openly gay men and lesbians as clergy
- 1971 – *About Your Sexuality* (AYS) published (jr. high curriculum)
- 1972 – Beacon Press publishes *Pentagon Papers*
- 1983 – Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (replaces LRY)
- 1989 – Partner Church Program (UUA and Transylvanian churches)

- 1991 – *New York Times* ad protesting Persian Gulf War (400 UU ministers)
- 1994 – *Journey Toward Wholeness* (denomination-wide racism awareness)
- 1996 – General Assembly calls for civil marriage for same-sex couples
- 1999 – *Our Whole Lives* (OWL) replaces *AYS*
- 2000 – Elected first African American president of the UUA
- 2004 – Increased public witness on behalf of same-sex marriage
- 2007 – “The Time is Now” (first national publicity in nearly 40 years]

Forgive me if I've bored you to tears with this whirlwind nickel tour, but our way of religion, despite its long history, can be mighty confusing the first time around. Especially at Christmas time. (Notice the smooth, professional segue back to the topic at hand...?)

A RELIGIOUS LIBERAL'S CHRISTMAS

Under the category of shameless self-promotion, tomorrow evening I'll be joining the good folk of Nora Church for my fourth Christmas Eve service as their minister. Given what I've said here this morning, you'll not be surprised if the UU Christians among us see in that celebration the birth of the itinerant teacher, their paradigm of what it means to be transparent for the sake of Love. The religious humanists will again wrestle with some of the words to the carols. (What's new?) Throw in the mystics, the agnostics, the theists, atheists and a Pagan or two, and I think either your head will explode that such a motley crew can get along or you'll understand what I mean when I say that it's not our beliefs that hold us together: it's our commitment to a free

and responsible search for truth. It's our urge to be among kindred souls who are, themselves, following the spiritual path that feeds and sustains them. And it's our dogged belief that things on Planet Earth could be better – that justice and mercy and peace are God in different clothes.

So, here's the deal. By some folks' standards we're either delusional, demonic or worse. So be it. (Hey, nobody's perfect.) But whether you're part of Nora Church, another religious community or none at all; whether you find my theology worthwhile, blasphemous or just confusing; whether this is a Christmas that will have you spending time with people you love, people you don't love or alone and stuck on Memory Lane; whether you're in a good place in your spirit, so-so or deep in the throes of an existential dilemma, I want to steal some thunder from tomorrow evening's service (more gratuitous self-promotion] and leave you with these words from former UU minister, Bruce Marshall, titled, "A Complicated Christmas":

READING

Merry Christmas.