



## **“We Are Not Christian”**

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“We are not Christian.”

When I hear these words describing our church coming from the pulpit I feel a quick jolt go through my body. Is it true? What must the visitors think? I take a quick peak at the congregation. Nobody seems shocked and as far as I can tell, no visitors are walking out. Oh. I guess it is just me having that reaction. Please understand that I have had years of religious conditioning before I found First Unitarian Church. And because this church is so compatible with what I find most important and basic to Christianity, I guess I like to pretend that it is a Christian Church. In fact, I think this congregation is a slice of Heaven! So how can it not be Christian?

A little personal history is in order here. As a child growing up in rural Lancaster County Pennsylvania, regular church and Sunday school attendance along with Wednesday night Prayer meeting, Vacation Bible School...(and did I mention yearly Revival Meetings?) all helped to build a conservative religious base for my world view. The West Green Tree Church of the Brethren is located between Harrisburg and Lancaster, in Southern Pennsylvania. Back in the 1950 and 60's the congregation was mostly farmers and factory workers. My parents both had 8<sup>th</sup> grade educations

which was not that unusual for their generation. College education was rare. All the older women wore their hair long and wore large head coverings. The young adult women were just beginning to cut their hair and wear smaller head coverings in the early 1960's.

Members of the Church of the Brethren and the similar Mennonites in Pennsylvania were much more conservative than the Ohio congregations. Sin, idolatry, hell, pagan, heathen were commonly spoken words in our church and we were admonished to be different from the world. I remember a number of services that closed by extending an invitation to join the church and become "saved", as that might be the last chance we would get, not knowing who might get into a car accident or die before the next invitation to be saved. And so, at the tender age of 8 I decided to stop "playing with fire" and became saved. I do believe that my church elders were a little concerned about my young age, but I was not the only 8 year old to want to join the Church, and I am sure they also wanted to play it safe.

I had a number of Mennonite Aunts and Uncles who were even more conservative than my parents. They all wore the "plain dress", something that was limited in my church to the older women born before 1910. Understand it was a big religious deal for me to cut my hair to shoulder length in Junior High and to stop wearing the hair covering except to church. As a young feminist it didn't seem fair to me that only the women had to cover their hair. Movies were forbidden in my family but my older brothers paved the way and I went to the movie theater for the first time at age 16 with some trepidation. I suffered no ill effects and the taboo was broken.

The Civil Rights Movement, the Viet Nam War, the Peace Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement were all critical to my teenage development. It also helped to have an older brother who went to theological seminary and who was a religious and political activist. His involvement with the Poor People's Campaign, marches on Washington and various demonstrations were fascinating to my teenaged self. I started reading political newspapers and Tolstoy and suddenly I became much more of a liberal and maybe even a bit radical as I pondered civil disobedience and non-violent actions to effect social change. It was indeed a time to question religion and the establishment and I was only unusual because of my conservative surroundings in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

I considered things like people could be "Christian" without knowing it if their lives reflected the teachings of Jesus. I challenged my teachers at school and in church. I was dismayed that my "pacifist church" had so many members joining the military and that the pastor would not speak out

against war. I put the Vietnamese people on the prayer list one too many times and the church decided to limit prayers to members of our own congregation. Years later I met our pastor at a national church conference and he confessed that he had indeed been against the war but remained silent for fear of losing his job. Teenage religious ideals met adult religious inconsistencies and compromises and I was appalled. I am sure there were quite a few adults who felt sympathy for my parents with their unusual only daughter but there were also adults who appreciated my religious and political concerns.

In 1970 I was excited to leave conservative Pennsylvania. I took my theological questions and political concerns 500 miles westward to Manchester College, a small Church of the Brethren liberal arts school in Northern Indiana. I hoped to get all of my religious questions neatly settled in those four years, but now I would say, fortunately, that didn't happen. I did have an excellent professor who taught Old and New Testament Bible classes that were helpful antidotes to some of the fundamentalist teachings I grew up with. I had academic reinforcement for the Bible being a book of faith, not science. I learned there was no Biblical basis for the fire and brimstone hell. I learned those Old Testament folks borrowed some of their theology and customs from their pagan neighbors...Who knew there were Unitarians in the Old Testament?

After moving to Cincinnati, I joined a small Christian Community Church in the West End, attracted by the activist pacifist minister Maurice McCrackin, the social justice gospel and the friendly racially integrated congregation. This satisfied my spiritual needs for over 20 years and it was difficult to leave the comfort of those friendships. Where would I find a racially integrated, gay and lesbian friendly church with a liberal theology that would foster my spiritual growth?

That would be here...at First Unitarian....a congregation that I fell in love with right from the start. This church is not perfect but it is practically perfect in so many ways, at least for me. It truly did and does feel like heaven to me.

Let's replay the scenario. I arrive and two smiling angels greet me and open the church doors. Inside the head welcoming angels Linda and Ray greet me, give me a name tag and point the way to the sanctuary. Everyone is wearing name tags. (How did they know it takes me forever to remember names?). People are friendly. The sanctuary is beautiful. The music is wonderful. The morning message is inspirational and I have new thoughts and revelations to ponder. The hymns are not all familiar but they have wonderful words that I can relate to, and inclusive language. The

entire hour (one hour and no more!) is very spiritual and thoughtful. Afterwards there is a time of fellowship and coffee and many people stick around and talk to me. Some share their religious journey. I am reassured by the presence of former nuns. This congregation is extremely organized and very friendly. There are many committees and lots of activities and social justice work. There are small groups, circle suppers, community building dinners...so many ways to get to know others and work together. I am amazed by the diversity of religious backgrounds and individual definitions of faith and how we can all respect and honor our differences...at least most of the time. It feels like heaven to me.

So what is this fear thing associated with religion and specifically Christianity? Or with we are not Christian? Is my religion fear based or faith based? The religion I grew up with and my decision to become a Christian at age 8 was fear based more than faith based. Using fear or societal pressure to manipulate someone into joining a religious faith is sad and does not foster a mature faith. Religious freedom encourages genuine faith based decisions. Jesus may teach us "the Way" but so do many other religious leaders. Let's be honest. Our choice of religion is usually based on culture and family of origin. As we mature, some of us modify our faith and beliefs. There is an arrogance associated with believing only one particular faith is good or has all the answers. I appreciate the slogan 'My God is too big for one religion'.

Some churches, some Christians are reluctant to work with non-Christians in an equal partnership. Perhaps they are afraid of having their faith diluted, being led astray. I know a delightful Christian woman who is a member of a very conservative congregation. When she came to speak at my former church she had a lovely message and urged us to look at the fruits of the spirit to judge the source of one's faith. How wise of her and us when we judge a faith by the fruits.

Theologian Karen Armstrong states the purpose of religion is to make us more compassionate. Perhaps that is one way to judge a religion. If it helps make the world a better place, then let it be. Some people may equate the term Christian with good but we have to remember terrible atrocities have been carried out by so called Christians. Praying before torture or acts of violence does not make one good or compassionate or a better Christian. It is not about being a Christian or an atheist. Rather what kind of Christian is some one? What kind of atheist? Loving and kind? Bitter and selfish? Judge by the fruits, not the name. How can we judge by one blanket term when there

are so many variations and conflicting definitions of Christianity or any religion? Rather how does one's faith guide relationships with other people and with the natural world?

Perhaps another cause for fear is doubt. I have evolved from the college student who wanted to get all my religious questions answered so I could get on with my life of certainty. It is good to have questions and doubts. Faith without doubt is not a very deep faith. Near the end of my father's life the pastor asked if he was certain of his place in heaven. My father wisely replied that he couldn't be sure until he got there. The pastor was appalled at this honesty and used the story to assure the rest of us at his funeral that we could indeed be sure of our place in heaven. I was so proud of my father. I never knew he had religious doubts. Having doubts can open us up to new possibilities. Sometimes when we are so certain, we can certainly be wrong. For instance I have relatives who are certain Muslims are going to hell. I know Muslims who are certain Christians are going to hell. I bet there are going to be a lot of surprised people in heaven! Of course we won't know for sure until we get there, but if we are Unitarians or of whatever faith, we can start practicing now!

I like the story about the woman who wanted to know the difference between heaven and hell. So she took a trip to hell where everyone was suffering. But what she saw surprised her very much. Hell was gorgeous and every enjoyable thing seemed plentiful. So why should anyone suffer? She took a trip to the dining room and saw a banquet table loaded with food and all kinds of delicacies. Yet all the people there looked emaciated and angry. There were shouting at each other and blaming each other for being hungry. When the woman looked closer she was horrified to discover that the people in hell had no elbow joints in their arms, so they were unable to bend them to put food in their mouths. All of them were starving and there was no joy. What a cruel joke to give them plenty of food if they could not feed themselves.

Eager to leave, the woman went to heaven and arrived at lunch time. What a shock. Heaven looked just like hell, a beautiful place with all the enjoyable things of life. As she approached the dining room she could hear laughter and sounds of joy. The dining table was full of delicacies just as in hell. But here the people looked happy, well fed and contented. She looked closely to see how their arms worked and was amazed to see that the people here also could not bend their arms to feed themselves. However they were not unhappy because they understood that the food in front of them and their hands were meant to serve others. So they all collected food from the table and fed

the others. When everyone fed the others they all got plenty to eat and nobody went hungry. It becomes heaven when we all enjoy together.

A question came to me one Sunday morning and I have heard the same question from others. If we are not Christian, then what are we worshipping? I overheard Annie Forester define worship as coming together for something of worth and I like that. Isaiah Chapter 1: 16-17 defines worship as more than prayer and basically says “Stop doing evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed and help the orphans and widows”. You aren’t working for Justice? Then don’t think you are worshipping God, says Isaiah.

It is the diversity of religious backgrounds and diversity of how we define our faith and still manage to come together, Sunday mornings and other times for worship...something of worth...social justice concerns and having respect and awe for the known and the unknown together in community that makes First Church heaven like.

How do we know if something is Christian? Think of the song, “And they will know we are Christians by our love”. Compare that to the Unitarian campaign Standing on the Side of Love. They will know we are Unitarians Universalists because we are standing on the Side of Love. You must be a Christian because you have so much love. And you must be a Unitarian Universalist, because you are standing on the side of love. Is there so much difference? Do we need to be afraid?

My time in this congregation has helped me to be more compassionate and open-minded. I am so humbled by the goodness of people of different faiths and backgrounds. I like the breathing room, the freedom to think and question that Unitarianism allows and promotes. It seems so honest. I appreciate the interest and respect shown to other religions. I believe in the coming together of individuals of diverse backgrounds and faiths and working on our commonality and respecting our differences and our spiritual growths in progress. Add some friendliness, social justice and it sounds like the kind of heaven I want to be a part of.

Are we Christian? Perhaps it is more descriptive to say we are not exclusively Christian. We are not exclusively Jewish, deists, theists, atheists, or pagans. We are Unitarian Universalists ...and I am in heaven!

—Lois Gish

Presented at First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati on Sunday morning 6-27-2010.

Morning scripture chosen because it seems very Unitarian:

Beloved, let us love one another. For love is of God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. They that love not, know not God, for God is love. Beloved, let us love one another.

1 John 4:7,8.