



## **Hang on Or Let Go? Personal Animosity Toward Christianity**

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It was a look I did not want to see in the eyes of my son.

It was a dinner table conversation. I mentioned that my seventh graders were studying the Bubonic Plague. We had read about the fear and suspicion this dreadful 14<sup>th</sup> century epidemic had provoked. Often, European Christians blamed Jews for this dreadful disease. In 1349, Strasbourg Jews who refused to convert to Christianity were tied to stakes and burned alive.

I don't remember my comment at the dinner table – whatever it was, it made clear that I relished opening up the eyes of my predominantly Christian students to this horrific episode– but I certainly remember the look in Matthew's eyes. That look brought me up short.

In retrospect, I have seen that look before, but have looked past it. There have been chilled silences from all of my sons when I said something particularly toxic about Christianity, or shared an historical nugget that I had earlier shared with my students, something that might lead them to start asking some pointed questions at *their* dining room tables.

Tim and I have raised three fine sons, with the ethical compass necessary to see their mother's moral failings. That look in Matt's eyes has stayed with me.

Why have I held so tight to my anger against Christianity? It has been over 30 years since I left the faith of my family, the faith of my parochial school. I did not drift away, I violently shook the dust of the Christian faith off my feet and loudly slammed the church door behind me on my way out. But that was years and years ago. Why is my anger still so strong, so forceful?

I think I am not alone in this. Often I find like minded individuals here at First Church. Many of us are refugees from Christianity. So many of us left in anger and in pain. Was the pain so deep that the anger cannot be dissipated? Or have we purposefully held onto that anger and kept it fresh?

I know that not everyone in this UU faith community comes from a Christian background, and not all those who left the Christian Church did so in anger. Many in the community find much of value in the Christian faith tradition. However, my sense is that there are enough of us angry former Christians to have an affect on the entire community.

Today, I want to investigate this anger that hangs on so many of us, an anger that seems such a logical response to the fallacy and negative consequences of the religion we left, the religion that so deeply affected us and those we love or loved, the religion that has such an outsized impact on our nation, the religion that often is at odds with many of our deeply held moral convictions, the religion that judges so many and excludes so many.

Wait a minute. How can we help but be angry? Isn't righteous indignation called for here?

Maybe, but maybe those are the wrong questions, or at least premature questions. Maybe we should ask first, what are the consequences of this anger? How does my anger hold me back, keep me spiritually in check, retard my ethical development? Does my anger stop me from engaging this majority religion in constructive ways? Does my anger blind me to what I could learn from this faith tradition? Our Unitarian Universalist covenant states we are "grateful for the religious pluralism which ennobles and enriches our faith." Can we be true to that ideal if we are willing to learn from all faiths, except Christianity?

But before I can get to those questions, first I must deal with the anger. Why such vitriol? Why does the hair on the back of my neck still stand up when I read in the Order of Service that the opening words comes from Paul's Letter to the Romans?

The answer I have arrived at attests strongly to my human frailty. The Christian Church asked for and was given my trust, my belief. I truly attempted to love the Christian god with all my heart and all my mind and all my soul. I attempted to walk in the paths of righteousness as laid before me by pastors, testaments and catechisms. The faith proved unworthy of my devotion and my trust. The faith proved unfounded, hollow. Worse still, the faith I had given myself to proved toxic to me, and to those I loved.

For each of us who left the Christian faith, the story is different, the reasons vary, but so often part of the experience was betrayal. We gave the best of ourselves to a faith that we came to feel not only unworthy, but uncaring, perhaps dishonest, even immoral. We left feeling betrayed. Betrayal begets anger.

And this anger must go deeper than that engendered by most other betrayals we will face in our lifetimes. It must, because this betrayal cut to our core. We were looking, seeking, working toward a divine essence. We trusted in the words, the doctrine, the sanctity, the truth of the church and its teachings. At some point, we refugees came to believe that these teachings were false. We had given much, trusted much, believed in so much, and come away empty, and spiritually bereft. The betrayal was painful. That's where the anger comes from. It comes from the pain.

Why does the anger still have such a sharp edge, such freshness? In my case, I think it comes from a lack of courage. It is easier to stay angry than to admit to the pain. To acknowledge betrayal is to acknowledge how much was given, how much was lost, and how much it mattered to me. To face the pain that caused the anger is to feel once again the bereavement. How much safer to keep the anger alive, than to admit how much the betrayal hurt.

But keeping that anger alive comes at a cost. As a Unitarian, I profess to look to the teachings of many religious traditions for enlightenment. I listen with great interest when a speaker tells me of Buddhist beliefs, or Hindu mythology or Jewish custom. But I cringe when the order of service says that a reading will come from the New Testament, or that the offertory music is Christian sacred

music, even if it is Latin and I don't understand the words. I don't have that kind of response to the Bhagavad-Gita, or Native American chants.

I view the world's religions as the results of mankind's search for answers and meaning, and I can learn from those religions, finding answers to my own questions, finding new perspectives, as my personal theology continues to evolve. Intellectually, I admit there is much of merit in Christian sacred writings and traditions. But, so often a wall of anger and resistance rises whenever the source of possible wisdom is Christianity. I am blinding myself.

Is there reason to be angry at Christians who brand lesbians and gays as outcasts because of who they love, Christians who are attempting to add an amendment to our Federal Constitution banning gay marriage? Absolutely! Is there reason to be angry at the Catholic Church for the criminally cavalier way in which the good name of the church and the protection of priests was more important than safeguarding children? Absolutely! Is there reason to be angry at those Christians who proclaim that ours is a Christian nation, and seek to insert their god and their theology into our nation's laws and civic understandings? Absolutely!

Does addressing these issues with anger go far toward solving them? Probably not. Do these issues represent the totality of <sup>modern</sup> Christianity? Absolutely not. Can I learn something significant from the Avondale pastors who pray to a god I don't believe in for an end to violence? Yes, I can learn from them. Can I learn something important from the Baptist churches across Kentucky that support and fund emergency teams ready to respond when people need help after natural disasters? Yes, I can learn from them. Can I learn something true and just from the actions of Peggy Gish, whose Christian faith leads her to places of violence and entrenched hatred in an attempt to bring about reconciliation? Yes, I can learn from her. Can I learn something true and just from the words of the Christian Bible and the ideas of Christian theologians? Yes, I can, if I open myself up rather than shut myself off.

If we can learn from the teachings of the world's religions, that includes the religion that brought great grief to some of us. That religion may be, metaphorically speaking, the bully on the block who seems to always get his way, but sometimes, he may have a good idea. We have to be brave enough, and large-hearted enough, and wise enough, to acknowledge the pain from our past, let go of the anger that grew out of the pain, and open our hearts and minds to the lessons we might learn from Christianity. We are surrounded by one of the world's great religions. Rather than responding in anger, or adopting a siege mentality, we need to walk the walk of our principles.

I will continue to give my ancient history students food for thought as we study religion, including the information about the slaughter of Jews in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In my own defense, I must let you know that I attempt to make my students aware of positive and negative aspects of every religion we study, including Christianity. If our classroom discussions lead them to ask pointed questions at their dinner table, so much the better.

What needs to change is my antipathy toward one of those religions we study. When the discussion at my dining room table leads me to turn to Christian theology or Christian scripture or Christian exemplars for possible answers, I will know I have started to live up to my Unitarian Universalist principles.