

THE INTERFACE BETWEEN UNITARIANS AND CHRISTIANITY

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Perception can be tricky – perception of ourselves, perception of others. When my grandson, Eli, was 3 years old, he gave me a dramatic illustration of just how tricky perception can be. Here is a child who gets angry when he hears about a bank foreclosing on a family farm, which is happening these days with some regularity in Wyoming where he lives. When he heard a discussion that a developer was planning to build 500 housing units over the town's aquifer, he told his class at school the next day that their water was going to be destroyed. A perceptive child. So, when he told me that Bryan, one of his classmates, was a Republican, I was intrigued. I asked him how he knew Bryan was a Republican. He answered, with just a bit of indignation in his voice, "He stands up to pee." I guess, everybody but me must have already known that.

I expect the perception of many Christians driving by our building is that we worship a flaming champagne glass. Those who know a little bit more about us may suspect that we are heretics. That there is nothing we are required to believe or, maybe even worse, that we dare to choose what to believe.

Unlike my grandson, Eli, they are partially right. We are heretics in the classic sense of the term, a word that derives from the Greek root that means CHOICE. We have no creed that we must accept. We have no dogma that we are forced to acknowledge whether we believe it or not. We are free from the constraints imposed by others. That is one of the values that sets us apart from traditional churches. Each of us as Unitarians has an obligation to seek out and develop our own system of beliefs and ethics.

This is a situation similar in many ways to that of early Christian churches. Elaine Pagels in her book BEYOND BELIEF, makes the point that early Christians saw their fledgling religion as a process of seeking and transformation, not of adherence to any immutable set of beliefs. In her opinion, “beliefs are overrated” in Christianity. Up until 325, Christians were free to choose from a range of over 30 “gospels” and varying beliefs about Jesus and God. Origen, considered one of the greatest theologians and biblical scholars of the early church fathers, challenged ideas about the Trinity and about the divinity of Christ, while advocating the inherent goodness of people. After the Nicene Creed was imposed on the Church by Constantine in a political move in 325, Origen

and all others who argued for freedom of belief were condemned as heretics and persecuted for centuries.

The certainty of dogma, be it secular humanism, fundamentalist Christian, extreme patriotism, or Islamic fundamentalism, has its appeal. All answers are given. All one has to do is accept, believe, and have faith.

We Unitarians, on the other hand, are never certain we have the final answers. We have a set of values embodied in our 7 principles. We are optimistic about our ability to apply those values to the complexities of life and arrive at individual answers concerning right and wrong and appropriate actions.

Tolerance and reason have always been basic values reflected in our principles. Tolerance requires that we recognize the inherent worth and dignity of every person, that we accept one another, that we respect the right of conscience. At the same time, the rational pursuit of truth has always been a part of our tradition. It is not enough to simply believe something because some authority said it is true. We expect evidence that can be rationally defended – “A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

Let's examine some of those values in the context of how we relate to our Christian neighbors.

Sam Harris in his book *THE END OF FAITH* and Richard Dawkins in *THE GOD DELUSION* are right in their criticism of moderate Muslims and moderate Christians for not being more critical of religious extremists. Their failure to criticize makes it easier for the religious fundamentalists of both groups to prosper unchallenged. After all in our society, you aren't supposed to criticize someone else's religion, are you?

Or, in the words of John O'Donohue, Irish poet and philosopher, "Religious fundamentalists, who claim to speak for God yet would not be able to distinguish God from a cucumber, are allowed full access to the public, and nobody comes along and questions their vacuousness. We need the renowned academics to step up and say, 'The emperor has no clothes.'"

Well, I would argue that we have an obligation to criticize religious fundamentalism, because our responsible search for truth and meaning calls into question certain fundamentalist Christian dogmas. We are going to look at five of those dogmas, some only briefly.

BIBLICAL INERRANCY

The first is Biblical inerrancy. We'll look more extensively at this because the other issues all trace back to this one.

According to Gallup 35% of Americans believe that the Bible is the literal, inerrant word of God. Another 48% believe that it is the "inspired" word of God.

That's why I love Leviticus 20. It's among my favorite passages in the Bible, because it demonstrates so dramatically the hypocrisy of the Christian right's condemnation of homosexuality. It indeed says that homosexuality is an abomination. The Christian fundamentalists interpret this verse in absolute terms. At the same time, they ignore all the other condemnations contained here.

Listen to these:

If you curse your parents, you must be killed. Stoning is the preferred way.

Any man who commits adultery with a married woman must be killed. There goes half of Congress.

If he commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, they both must die.

If he has sex with his mother, they both must be killed.

If he has sex with his daughter-in-law, they both must be killed.

If he has a homosexual relationship, they both must die. This raises the issue of why the Christian right is so wimpy about this. It's not enough to just condemn gay people or to keep them from marrying. The Bible, the inerrant word of God, says they ought to be out there killing them.

If he has sex with a woman and her mother, all three must be burned to death – the first variation from stoning.

If he has sex with an animal, he and the animal must be killed. This guy has quite an imagination.

If he has sex with his sister, they both are to be executed in public.

If he has sex with a woman during her menstrual period, they are to be banished.

Praise the reading of God's word.

According to Deuteronomy, Exodus, and Proverbs we must also stone people to death for heresy, working on the Sabbath, worshiping graven images, practicing sorcery and a wide variety of other imagined crimes.

But, you say, this is all Old Testament stuff. Right. So listen to Matthew 19:21-22 in which Jesus replied to the young man who asked what he had to do to gain eternal life. “If you wish to be perfect, go and sell what you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.” Somehow that message does not get through to the Christian mega-rich, mega-churches.

Or take Mark 16:16-18, the earliest of the gospels, in which Jesus is quoted as saying “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; he who does not believe will be condemned. These are the signs that will be associated with believers: In my name they will cast out devils; they will have the gift of tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and be unharmed should they drink deadly poison.” Come on. If this is the literal word of God, grab a rattlesnake to test if you really believe.

SLAVERY

Then, there is the issue of slavery. Apparently, the North didn't believe the Bible was inerrant when they whopped us in the Civil War. Paul is crystal clear on this issue. Take 1st Peter 2:18: “Slaves must be respectful and obedient to their masters, not only when they are kind and gentle, but also when they are unfair.”

There are even more extensive directions to slaves to obey their masters in Ephesians 6:5-8 and Colossians 3:18-24.

Of course, that just picks up on Old Testament directive to slaves. Slavery is perfectly acceptable. Beating your slaves is approved. Enslaving children is fine. Separating slave families if OK. Check Genesis 17, Exodus 12 and 21, or Leviticus 25.

WOMEN

Then, there is the status of women. Pat Robertson speaks for the Christian fundamentalists when he says: “The feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family, political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians.” Wow! All because women have the nerve to think they are as good as we are!

Paul, of course, was the original Christian misogynist. Bishop Spong posits that Paul was probably gay. Repeatedly, Paul admonishes women to be subservient to men. Take, as just one of many examples 1st Corinthians 11:3-10. Women are to cover their heads in worship or have their hair shaved off. However, “A man should certainly not cover his head, since he is the image of God

and reflects God's glory; but woman is the reflection of man's glory." Or, 1st Corinthians 14:34-35: "As in all the churches of the saints, women are to remain quiet at meetings since they have no permission to speak; . . . If they have any questions to ask, they should ask their husbands at home." Or, Colossians 3:18: "Wives, give way to your husbands, as you should in the Lord." Or, 1st Peter 3:1: "Wives should be obedient to their husbands."

Then there is the horrible story in Genesis 19:4-8. The men of Sodom came to Lot's house demanding that he send out the men he had taken into his house, "calling to Lot they said, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Send them out to us that we may abuse them.' Lot came out the door, and having closed the door behind him said, 'I beg you brothers, do no such wicked thing. Listen, I have two daughters who are virgins. I am ready to send them out to you, to treat as it pleases you. But as for the men, do nothing to them, for they have come under the shadow of my roof.'"

Bless the reading of God's holy word.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Mary did not become the virgin mother of Jesus until the 9th decade when Matthew first, then Luke introduced that idea into the Christian tradition. It was not until the third and fourth centuries that the virgin birth entered the creeds.

The writers of Luke and Matthew, in a stretch to make the life of Jesus conform to Old Testament prophecy, insist that Mary conceived as a virgin (Greek: *parthenos*), harking back to the Greek rendering of Isaiah 7:14. Unfortunately, for advocates of Mary's virginity the Hebrew word *alma* found in Isaiah simply means "young woman", without any implication of divinity. It seems all but certain that the Christian dogma of the virgin birth and much of the church's anxiety about sex was the result of a mistranslation from the Hebrew (whether Matthew did it accidentally or on purpose, we'll never know).

There is no mention of the virgin birth in Mark, the earliest gospel, or in John. Paul, the earliest writer, seems to refute it (Romans 1:3), referring to Jesus as being "born of the seed of David according to the flesh" (in effect asserting that Joseph was the father) and Jesus "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4) meaning that Jesus was really human, with no reference to Mary's virginity.

THE BODILY RESURRECTION

On the third day, Jesus arose from the dead and ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God. Right! And Mohammed rose into heaven on the back of a winged white horse according to Islam. It's as easy to believe one as the other.

Bishop Spong is correct in his assertion that “the virgin birth was placed into creeds along with the cosmic ascension, though I know of no reputable biblical scholar in the world today who thinks that either happened in any literal way.”

EVOLUTION

The theory that all complex life on earth has developed from simpler life-forms over billions of years. This is a fact that no longer admits of intelligent dispute. Yet, only 28% of Americans accept evolution as a fact.

You've heard folks say, particularly creationist Christians say, “Evolution is just a theory, not a fact.” They simply don't understand how the term “theory” is used in science. Facts must be explained with reference to other facts. These larger explanatory models are “theories.” Theories make predictions and can, in

principle, be tested. The phrase “the theory of evolution” does not in any way suggest that evolution is not a fact. We speak about the “germ theory of disease” or the “theory of gravitation” without casting doubt upon the source of disease or gravity as facts of nature.

Here is what we know. We know that the universe is billions of years older than the Bible indicates. We know that all complex organisms on earth, including ourselves, evolved from earlier organisms over the course of millions of years. The evidence for this is overwhelming. The biblical account of creation suggests that God created all animals and plants as we now see them. There is no question that the Bible is wrong about this.

GOD

Many Christians believe there is a personal god who intervenes in their individual lives, in a one on one relationship, controlling even the most trivial matters. Many of us have difficulty with the lack of evidence that such a supernatural entity exists. In my 65 years of experience, including three years of intense study in a Methodist seminary, I have found no evidence that such a being exists. The proposition that God exists is, in Karl Popper’s term, “non-

falsifiable.” Since it is not based on facts, one cannot use facts to test its adequacy.

There are those who insist that they have experienced God in their lives, even to the point of communicating with him. Pat Robertson is forever telling the world what God has told him. One has to be careful with this approach as proof of God’s existence. The son of Sam serial killer in New York said a dog told him to kill people. When you hear a voice speaking to you, how do you know it is the voice of God? Then, there’s the issue, which I won’t go into here, of the serious psychopathology of people who hear voices the rest of us cannot hear. They need a shrink.

Is it possible that god exists in the traditional sense claimed by conservative Christians, intervening in the natural order of things? Yes, in the same sense that it is possible that there are pink ponies on Pluto, though there is not any evidence of it, and therefore, it is extremely unlikely.

SO WHAT ARE WE UNITARIANS TO DO WITH THESE CHRISTIANS?

Totally reject them? Have nothing to do with them? View them as our intellectual enemy?

There are several reasons this path is not open to us.

1. Our principles again help give us direction here, particularly the assertion of the inherent worth of every individual. These are not bad people. They are not evil. They are just wrong, deluded, believing things that have no basis in reality, bless their hearts. Reflected in our principle recognizing the worth of every human being – even people like Pat Robertson, Karl Rove, and Roy Moore – is our value of tolerance. As long as conservative Christians do not try to impose their ideas on us or interfere with our pursuit of rational truth, we can relate to them as valuable to us as human beings, even as we criticize and reject their ideas.
2. A second reason is that there are many Christians who do not accept the delusions we have been talking about. Not all Christians are fundamentalists, even though in our area it may seem that way. Since the beginning of Christianity, there have been those who have made accommodations to the wider world of knowledge. Some contemporary Christians have made accommodations to the modern world. My systematic theology professor in seminary, a widely

respected scholar in both the fields of theology and philosophy, wrote a book entitled, CHRIST WITHOUT MYTH, demythologizing the New Testament portrayal of Jesus. Bishop Spong in his book THE SINS OF SCRIPTURE is a more contemporary example. There is and has always been a liberal strain within Christianity that deserves our respect, that shares many of our intellectual values.

3. The third reason is that there are many Christians who are engaged in activities that are consistent with our principles. In terms of our concern for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations, think about the contribution made to the civil rights struggle by religious leaders. We say that one of our goals is world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all. The peace movement, both the Vietnam anti-war protests and the current protests against our Iraq policy, provide examples of religious leadership that is consistent with our principles. The fight for human rights worldwide and the establishment of justice are other examples.

There are even evangelicals who share our commitment to some of our principles. Rick Warren, a megachurch preacher and author of

the best-selling book *THE PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE*, has adopted Aids in Africa as his crusade. At the initial conference he held for conservative Christian leaders on the topic, he invited Sen. Barack Obama to speak, along with conservative Sen. Sam Brownback. This prompted outrage from some other evangelicals because of Obama's liberal politics. Rick Warren did not blink. He was willing to work with the left if it meant achieving his goal of combating Aids.

Rev. Richard Cizik, the leader of the National Association of Evangelicals, a broad coalition that represents 30 million Christians in hundreds of denominations, has tried to expand the evangelical movement's agenda to include issues like climate change and human rights, reflecting coincidence with our principles. He has been roundly condemned by some other evangelicals for diverting the movement from what they deem more important issues like abortion and gays (which for many of them seems to be the only issues they care about), but he has not backed down. He has become the emblem of a new breed of evangelical environmentalists. Last year more than 100 prominent pastors, theologians, and college presidents signed an "Evangelical Climate Initiative" calling for action on the issue. Isn't that

consistent with our principle calling for respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part?

We don't have to be afraid of Christians. We may disagree with them, but the responsible search for truth requires us to recognize the contributions they make, to recognize that they may be our allies, not our enemies. When missionary hospitals are the only source of assistance to desperate people in the poorest parts of Africa, when churches support soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and clinics that otherwise would not exist, they are acting in ways consistent with our principles.

SO IS THERE ANYTHING WE CAN LEARN FROM CHRISTIANITY? WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF CHRIST?

Thomas Jefferson, an unflinching rationalist, deeply admired Jesus the man but disdained the cloak of doctrine and mysticism in which he had been draped. And so, despite all his duties as president, Jefferson found the time to sit down in the White House with his Bible and, over several evenings, excise with a razor all those passages that related to the virgin birth, the resurrection, the incarnation, and anything else that smacked of the supernatural. Only one in ten verses survived. This truncated Gospel portrayed

Jesus as a wise man who spent his time wandering around Galilee, delivering parables and aphorisms.

Stephen Prothero makes the point in his book *THE AMERICAN JESUS* that the fact that the United States is a Jesus nation “does not make it a Christian one.” While the cultural authority of Jesus, in Prothero’s words, “has been used to promote the Christian tradition,” it “has also been used to reform and subvert it, both from within and without, by Americans who see the man from Nazareth as a nondoctrinal, nondenominational, non-Christian.”

Jesus’ central message was the call to love. The story of his life, shorn of its myths, provides a powerful example of integrity, courage, and compassionate living. Just to offer one example: The story in John 13 of Jesus washing the feet of his disciples at the last supper offers a powerful portrayal of the value of humility – not that we Unitarians need any lessons in humility, I’m sure.

As long as Christians don’t cherry-pick the Bible to form the basis of their social policy agenda, opposing stem cell research, perpetuating ignorance by opposing the teaching of evolution, and, as the Alabama Legislature recently proposed, establishing a Christian Heritage Week in the public schools, we can view them

as allies in the effort to make the world a better place. But, as Barry Goldwater in today's reading indicates: "I will fight them every step of the way if they try to dictate their moral convictions to all Americans in the name of conservatism."