

A Seismic Shift in Christianity:

What Does It Mean for Unitarian Universalism?

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HYMNS

#175, We Celebrate the Web of Life; #201, Glory, Glory, Hallelujah (Since I Laid My Burden Down); #126, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.

READING

India's great leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, a Hindu, said this:

"The message of Jesus as I understand it, is contained in the Sermon on the Mount unadulterated and taken as a whole... If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, 'Oh, yes, I am a Christian.' But ... in my humble opinion, what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount... I am speaking of the Christian belief, of Christianity as it is understood in the west."

Reading of a Sermon on the Mount excerpt:
Gospel of Matthew 5:1-11

SERMON

Last fall, I was outside the sanctuary doors here at our home away from home at this Congregational Church. Most of our members were at coffee hour, but one came up to me and drew me toward a family at the doorway. "Uh, Roger? These people want to convert to Christianity." *Oh!* I thought. *With me?*

There were a young man and woman, slight of build, with dark hair, and two little kids. Beside them was an older man, who translated for them. I couldn't identify what language they were speaking so briskly to one another. Hoping to slow things down, I greeted everyone, including the kids, with a handshake. This man was their landlord. They were all Persians, and speaking in Farsi.

I asked: "Are they Muslims?" He said yes. "Are you a Muslim too?" "Yes I am," he said, "but I am trying to help them. This is what they want to do." So here they were, outside a building with its tower with a cross on top.

"Well, our service ended an hour ago," I said. "And... we are not really a Christian denomination." I didn't go on to explain that

Unitarian Universalism has a Christian heritage, Christian roots, but by now it's theologically open and very mixed. I wouldn't know how to turn someone into a Christian. I was at a loss.

I wondered how they might have experienced the Congregational Church's worship style, earlier on Sundays in this place. It's a very word-based service, all in English, and few rituals without words. Didn't seem like a fit. I thought of the Spanish language congregation here in the afternoon; it has a praise band. Would they get into that? I thought of the Bible-thumping sermons I'd heard coming from the building across the way, in the strong voice of African American woman preacher. Soulful music, too, but still a very *wordy* experience, all in English.

I wondered if anything here would work. I asked: "What kind of Christians do they want to be? There's Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal and main line Protestant." *They* didn't know.

I said, "There must be a group of Persian Christians somewhere. Why not look it up on the internet?" He said they would, and we all shook hands to say goodbye. I wanted to bless them. The only blessing I could say that they'd understand was a Muslim one, so I said: "Salaam Alaikum."

Even with that Persian family's eager show of interest, Christianity is not the draw it used to be in this country. Recently the media shouted the news from the [Pew Research Center](#): The percentage of the U.S. population that identifies as Christian is declining. In just the last seven years the share of Christians has dropped from 78 percent of the population to 70 percent. In all regions of the country, participation is down, even among Catholics and evangelicals. Mainline Protestants are making a nosedive.

The surprise of this news is in the steepness of the change, but not the direction. In the past half century, religion has lost its leadership role in the social and civic life of this country. It's called secularization. It happened first in Great Britain and Western Europe. The churches there are still popular, but mainly for tourists, concert goers, and art lovers, not for members.

In earlier centuries, religion was an umbrella institution, encompassing all the other institutions of social, family and civic life. No longer. Religion is now just one of many options in Europe and in

North America. Right now there's a seismic shift happening in the Christian world.

Christianity is going south. It's not going away, but its center of gravity is shifting to the global South—Africa, Latin America, and Asia, including the Philippines. Christianity has always been a global faith, but our awareness has been dominated by Western expressions of it.

Most historians have ignored its global reach. One who does explain it well is Philip Jenkins of Baylor University. In his analysis, the shift of the Christian center of gravity over the twentieth century, from northern hemisphere to southern, is nothing less than a religious “revolution.” (Didea and Horrell)

For example, Pentecostals represent the fastest growing version of Christianity. Their largest denomination is the Assemblies of God. Since its founding in California a century ago, the Assemblies of God has reached 3 million members in the United States. But that's nothing compared to the Global South. In Latin America and the Caribbean, there are 28 million followers in the Assemblies of God. In Africa, 16 million. (Jenkins, *Astonishing Assemblies*) Many of them are converts from Catholicism.

The top reasons people have reported for converting to Protestantism were based on personal experience and practical needs, reasons like enjoyment of a spirited style of worship, finding a church that helps members better than their old one, and especially, seeking a personal connection with God. Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity now claim about one in every five people in Latin America. Though still massive, Catholicism has declined from 84 percent to 69 percent of the Latin American population. (Pew Research Center 2014)

According to Jenkins, one Christian out of every 11 in the world speaks Portuguese; that's 200 million of them. A century ago, most Christians of the world lived in Europe and North America. Now, according to the [Pew Forum](#), twenty-five percent of them live in Sub-Saharan Africa. By the year 2050, Africans will make up 4 out of every 10 Christians in the world.

Generally speaking, the early spread of Christianity to the southern hemisphere took place through missionaries, and through the global reach of European empires. Now, however, many lands that received missionaries long ago are sending out

missionaries of their own. In far Northeast India, tribal families in the state of Mizoram are 90 percent Christian, thanks to the work of Welsh missionaries in the 19th century. Wales is now highly secular. So, a decade ago Mizoram churches began sending missionaries to Wales. (Jenkins, *In the Land of Zomia*).

By now, people in the Southern hemisphere have shaped Christianity according to their own expressions of faith. It reflects their ways of living, not a culture from the northern hemisphere. As Jenkins points out, they are mostly conservative cultures, sometimes militantly conservative.

If you grew up in a mainline denomination in the U.S., you may have left it because it felt rigid or narrow to you, theologically or socially. Yet North American Protestants seem very liberal compared to their counterparts in other lands.

What is called a Methodist or Presbyterian church in Africa may look like a fundamentalist one to a churchgoer in California. It can be painful for liberal denominations based in the United States to work with their faith families across the globe, where the faithful are non-white, mostly poor and anything but liberal on social issues or theology.

But now I want to tell you about the hot new trend in religion, right here in the United States, as reported by Pew Center. This trend is called Nothing. It's No Religious Affiliation. The share of people with no affiliation represents 23 percent of the U.S. population. This includes atheists and agnostics, of course, but it also includes a wide variety of belief and practice. For example, according to Pew, only 5 percent of them attend a weekly service. But 2/3 of them say they believe in God. More than half describe themselves as religious in their own way or as “spiritual but not religious,” with no clear definition of what that phrase means.

Many of the Unaffiliated are younger adults. The Pew study shows that every new generation of U.S. Americans has a smaller rate of religious participation than the generation that came before it. No longer can we assume that because your parents were Baptist you will grow up as a Baptist, bring your kids up that way, and be a Baptist all your life. Even if you were brought up Jewish or confirmed as a Catholic teen, the chances are declining that you will stay involved as an adult.

The Pew Center notes that many Americans use their 20s and 30s as times of creativity and exploration in their spiritual lives. Author Robert Putnam calls early adulthood a time of “religious tinkering.” While this image of tinkering implies curiosity and spiritual openness, it does not imply commitment to an institution. It does not guarantee longevity in any one place.

Another factor these days is that it’s less common for younger adults in the U.S. to settle down in one city with a family and career at an early age, as Americans did several decades ago.

Economic trends have not made it easy. Upheavals in labor markets have kept per-capita income nearly flat for three decades. Economic booms, and bubbles that burst, have brought instability. College student debt has ballooned. According to the Reverend Carol Howard Merritt, younger adults have “more frequent periods of underemployment and unemployment.” Jobs don’t last as long as they used to. People change jobs and industries frequently. For workers from age 25 to age 34, the median tenure in any job is 2.7 years.

Such trends have affected not only involvement in religion. Participation in service clubs, lodges, fraternal societies and membership organizations of all kinds has fallen with each new generation. In Sacramento, I’ve been a guest at luncheon meetings of a local service club. The club can’t even use up the minimum number of meals it must reserve at the restaurant where it meets.

Young members are few and far between. Some clubs are doing better than others. Some groups are experimenting to meet the needs of the new people they hope to reach. Yet many membership organizations continue in the same long-term habits. They show no curiosity about the changes going on all around us, no curiosity about how a group might respond creatively. They live by the vampire’s attitude of outreach and recruitment: “Must have...fresh blood!”

Thirty years ago I moved to Springfield, Illinois, for my first job in a new career. As a young adult, I began a spiritual search by visiting many churches--my own form of tinkering and exploration. One Sunday I paid a visit to a church of the mainline Protestant denomination in which I had grown up. It was an elegant limestone building with stained glass and dark wood pews, like the one I had attended on Sundays with my mother.

I slipped into a pew behind an older male-female couple. The lady turned around, smiled at me and said welcome. “I hope you stay,” she said. “We need young people.” I smiled back.

I should have asked, WHY DO YOU NEED THEM? But I didn’t stick around.

Did they “need young people” because they wanted to keep their church operating in the same ways and with the same habits it had followed for decades? Or did they want young people so they could *minister to them*? Did they want to get to know them as people?

This is now the question for all membership-based organizations amid the seismic shifts of our times. As we move into the future, do we focus on our sense of scarcity, or do we lead with hospitality and curiosity? Is our mission to serve, or merely to survive?

Unitarian Universalism has many characteristics of mainline, moderate Protestant denominations, in sociological terms. Our governance and worship styles are similar, even if our theologies differ. So, given our similarities, and given that mainline Protestant church attendance has dropped in seven years from 18 percent of the U.S. population to 14.7 percent, you may be asking: what does this mean for us?

According to the Pew studies, those who identify as UU or another type of religious liberal make up *almost* 1 percent of the U.S. population. We’re about the size of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. That’s good when you consider: when was the last time a UU knocked on someone’s door unless they were meeting them for coffee?

We are just a small part of the religious landscape, yet so far we are holding our own. In the past four decades, the mainline denominations have lost more members than we’ve ever had. So my advice to you is: drive safely and exercise. Eat a healthy diet. And have more children. Indeed, we’ve had high attendance in our nursery this year, as many as a dozen babies. What a blessing it is to have them here! What a gift. As Reverend Lucy says, our breeding and adoption program is working well. For this reason, we will refurbish the nursery back at our home base before we move back home. The new carpet is on order and we’re accepting donations.

A professor with whom I've worked at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley has watched Unitarian Universalism (and other denominations) for years. He says we are uniquely positioned to appeal to people who identify by the vague term of "spiritual but not religious." Many of those who are Unaffiliated are hungering for a home, longing to be known. Our embrace of both non-theistic and theistic expressions of meaning and hope is an appealing market niche. Yet we dare not take anything for granted.

The days have past when congregations could take it for granted that people automatically would keep filling the pews. No membership organization of any kind can take it for granted that folks who come through the doors will participate in ways that organizations used to expect them to. Yet people do keep coming. Not hordes of people, but real people. Real human beings, not statistics. Some of them do come back! Some of them join!

Sunday after Sunday, our visitors include individuals of all ages and families of all types. They must have reasons for being here! You know, people now have so many options for spending their time. So we must honor the fact that some people make a choice to spend time in THIS congregation.

The choice to be present here is a sign of something important. It may be a big step. One person's presence may be a sign of spiritual curiosity. Another's presence may reflect a search for personal growth and meaning. It may be a gesture of hope. Whatever else it is, a person's presence is a gift. We dare not take it for granted.

Do you know what the most important reason is for the growth of an organization? It's not the bylaws and committee structure. It's not theology or doctrine or lack of it. It's a personal invitation. It's a personal connection. It's the gift of presence. This is something we all can do.

I'm thinking about the story of a minister I know named Larry; he's about 60 now. As a child he was Catholic, but when he was 16, he learned about Unitarian Universalism.

He looked in the Yellow Pages for a UU congregation in his town. One Sunday, he got on his bike and rode to the church.

After attending the service he visited the church's bookstore. He met a woman volunteering there. She got to know him. She learned that he

was curious and he liked to read. She handed him a book about Unitarian Universalism, invited him to take it, and asked him to come back to tell her what he thought of it. He brought it back, and they discussed their opinions of it and his questions. She gave him another book. She said: "I look forward to talking with you again." This continued over the weeks and months, and a friendship developed. An inter-generational friendship. What a blessing.

This young man became a UU. He grew into a minister. He became an author and a leader in our movement. He's a consultant for congregations and a coach for ministers, including me.

What changed his life was not an advertising campaign. It was a simple, one-to-one gesture of curiosity, openness, and patience. It was the gift of presence. This is true hospitality.

This is what we are here for. This invitation. This connection. This blessing.

So may it be. Amen.

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