

## PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY AND RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper  
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January 9, 2011

**[Insert the story my experience growing up in small-town Ohio – esp. my conversion with Dan.]**

The version of Christianity that I grew up with in Ohio emphasized three things: a literal interpretation of the Bible, a preoccupation with sin and the salvation from eternal damnation that could be obtained only by the type of dramatic conversion experience that my well-intentioned brother imposed on me, and ignorance of any other alternative faith traditions. It was not all that different from the version of Christianity that is still prevalent in our local area—except that **ignorance** of alternative faith traditions has been replaced by a **rejection** of other religions, fueled by a fear of violent Islamic extremism.

In spite of the efforts by Christian conservatives to proclaim that America is or ought be a “Christian nation,” the fact is that we are the most religiously diverse nation in the world.

**[Insert photocopies of Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity*, pp. 208-11]**

America is the most religiously diverse nation in the world. Perhaps for that very reason, we struggle constantly to strike a balance between our tradition of tolerance and our longing for the security and **presumed** cohesion of the past. In her book *A New Religious America*, Diana Eck offers a useful framework for understanding the different ways Americans respond to the challenges of religious diversity: **exclusion, assimilation, and pluralism**. “For **exclusionists**, the answer to the tumultuous influx of cultural and religious diversity, which seemed to threaten the very core civilization of America, was to close the door. . . . The message, in brief, was stay home, or go home, or in any case be excluded from the table of participation here in America.” In our present context, this response is greatly amplified by perceived threats to our personal safety and the media-fed stereotype of all Muslims as antagonistic toward America.

“For **assimilationists**, the invitation to new immigrants was to come, but **leave your differences behind** as quickly as possible. In other words, come and be like us.” For many Muslims and others from different backgrounds, this approach poses a real dilemma as they struggle to reconcile their religious beliefs and practices with their desire to become part of mainstream American society. And they are understandably concerned about the attempts by exclusionists to marginalize them and their religious faith as threats to America. They join the ranks of other groups from the past who have felt the sting of American exclusivism: Catholics, Jews, and followers of Asian religions.

“For the **pluralist**, the American promise was to **come as you are, with all your differences**, pledged only to the common civic demands of citizenship. In other words, come and be yourselves.” The American motto is “*E pluribus unum*”: “One out of many.” As Diana Eck says, “The relation of the *pluribus* and the *unum* can be sounded in all three keys, depending on the emphasis. For the exclusivist, the oneness of the *unum* requires the exclusion of those who are different. The manyness of too much difference poses a threat to oneness. For the assimilationist, the oneness requires the many to shed their differences and become assimilated into the normative culture. For the pluralist, the oneness is shaped by the encounter of the many, the engagement of the many.” [Eck, p. 47]

Starting this Tuesday evening, Liz Barnes and I will be co-leading a course that will invite dialogue about a **progressive** version of Christianity that openly embraces religious diversity. We hope this class will be of particular interest not only to Fellowship members who have rejected the exclusivist version of Christianity under which they were raised, but also to nonmembers from our local community who are refugees from the Christian fundamentalism that is so prevalent in this area—even in some of the mainstream Protestant churches. We decided to title our course “progressive Christianity” because labels such as “liberal” or “conservative” can be misleading. In his book titled *The Heart of Christianity*, New Testament scholar Marcus Borg prefers to distinguish between **earlier and later** versions of Christianity. He illustrates this distinction with three examples that divide contemporary Christians.

**[Insert photocopied excerpts from Borg, pp. 3-4]**

Marcus Borg spends much of this book wrestling with the dilemma of what it means to be a Christian while also affirming the truths to be found in other faith traditions. He employs the familiar metaphor of paths going up a mountain. He says, “Envision a mountain, broad at the bottom, narrow at the top, the peak finally disappearing into ir, space, emptiness. At the bottom, the paths are farthest apart. . . . But as the paths lead higher, they become closer together until they converge on the mountaintop. And then, of course they disappear. And the place to which they lead, the mountaintop, is not ‘heaven,’ but ‘the sacred.’ The religions are not primarily about the next life, not about paths to an afterlife, but to life centered in the sacred in the here and now.” [p. 218]

This brings up another important distinction between the progressive and fundamentalist versions of Christianity. Fundamentalist Christianity—especially evangelical Christianity—emphasizes **sudden conversion** as the key to spiritual growth. Unless a person is “born again” in dramatic fashion, they are not saved from their sins. The biblical basis for this preoccupation with sin and salvation comes mainly from the Gospel of John and the writings of the Apostle Paul. Perhaps the most famous passage is John 14, verse 6: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” When this verse is followed by the question, “Where do you want to spend eternity?” it offers a powerful incentive to be converted, just as it did when my well-intentioned brother converted me as an adolescent.

As Marcus Borg says, “Christian exclusivism understands this verse to mean that you must know about Jesus and believe certain things about Jesus in order to be saved. But ‘the way’ that John speaks of is not about believing doctrines about Jesus. . . . Rather than being the unique revelation of a way known only in him, his life and death are the incarnation of a universal way known in all of the enduring religions.” [p. 111] It is the way of the death of the isolated self into a new life within the all-embracing Spirit of the Universe, by whatever name it is known in different faith traditions. “The image of following ‘the way’ is common in Judaism, and ‘the way’ involves a new self centered in God. One of the meanings of ‘Islam’ is ‘surrender’: to surrender one’s life to God by radically centering in God. And Muhammad is reported to have said, ‘Die before you die.’ Die spiritually before you die physically, die metaphorically (and really) before you die literally. At the heart of the Buddhist path is ‘letting

go’—the same internal path as dying to an old way of being and being born into a new. According to the *Tao te Ching*, a foundational text for both Taoism and Zen Buddhism, Lao Tzu said: ‘If you want to become full, let yourself be empty; if you want to be reborn, let yourself die.’ . . . Seeing this commonality between the way of Jesus and the ways of the world’s religions is sometimes disconcerting to Christians, given the history of ‘Jesus is the only way.’ But the commonality is cause for celebration, not consternation. . . . When the Christian path is seen as utterly unique, it is suspect. But when Jesus is seen as the incarnation of a path universally spoken about elsewhere, the path we see in him has great credibility.” [Borg, p. 119]

Marcus Borg wants to convince Christian exclusivists that they need not feel threatened by religious diversity. The question I want to raise is whether there is also a form of **Unitarian Universalist exclusivism**—particularly in our attitudes toward Christianity. Are we in our own way practicing intolerance of religious diversity? Margaret Bowens-Wheatley was the associate minister of the large UU church in San Diego until her death at age 57. The story of her spiritual journey is not uncommon among UUs. She says, “When I became a Unitarian Universalist more than twenty years ago, I was proclaiming atheism and was delighted to learn that there was a spiritual community for people like me. . . . I had dismissed Christianity as irrelevant because I experienced it as dogmatic and oppressive. Indeed, the particular form of Christianity that I grew up with *was* oppressive! Questioning was simply not permissible in an environment where biblical literalism prevailed. But in my lack of understanding about the diversity of Christianity, I had indulged in stereotyping: I assumed that if I knew one Christian, I knew them all.” [Margaret Bowens-Wheatley, “To Keep One’s Soul,” in Kathleen Rolenz (ed.), *Christian Voices in Unitarian Universalism*, pp. 110-11]

Over the next several years, operating within the climate of freedom she enjoyed as a Unitarian Universalist, she began to distinguish between the oppressive version of Christianity she had known and a far more progressive, inclusive version based on his life and teachings. She says, “Jesus’ focal point of preaching and ministry was what he called ‘the kingdom of God,’ by which he meant a state of being in *the here and now*. I prefer the term coined by Christian feminist Ada Maria Isasi-Dias, a Cuban theologian. She suggests that we consider Jesus’ reference as a **‘kindom’** of God, as an expression and recognition that we are all related, that we

are brothers and sisters, called to create a new world through loving kindness, a world made new by the way we treat each other. . . . The path I have chosen is the path of Jesus, a path that is embraced by *some* Christians. Unitarian Universalism gave me the freedom to reclaim the message of Jesus—not in an oppressive way but in a way that is freeing, loving, caring, and compassionate. And Unitarian Universalism gives me the freedom to go beyond one path, to continue to explore and embrace different theologies, wherever truth is found.” [pp. 112-14]

The defining experience of a progressive faith is not a sudden conversion but a steady growth in the capacity to move beyond oneself to embrace the whole human family and its many paths to a life of compassion and caring. **Inclusiveness** is the core message of our Universalist heritage. Our commitment to religious diversity must also include Christianity—especially the progressive version of Christianity that is very different from the stereotyped version that many of us have rejected. It’s time for us to practice what we preach about inclusiveness.

**[Insert # 474 – read responsively]**