

“The Pagan Pathway to Christianity”
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Have you ever wondered why we’re here? Not in the big philosophical way, “WHY ARE WE HERE?” but “Why are we here, you’re sitting there, I’m standing here?” Why do we do the things we do on Sunday mornings? (Point to Order of Service.)

I’ve told the story before about the woman who watched her mother cut off the bottom of the pot roast before putting it into the pan. Her mother didn’t know why she did it, so the daughter asked her grandmother. She didn’t know, either. The daughter then went to her great-grandmother, who really had to think about it and then she remembered: “Oh, yes, when great-grandpa and I were first married, all I had was a small roasting pan and I had to cut off the bottom of the roast so it would fit!”

Asking, “Why?” makes us conscious and opens up options we may never have considered. The result of blindly repeating a ritual like cutting off the bottom of a roast isn’t all that consequential. But when it comes to religion, and spirituality, our personal connection to something larger than ourselves, do we really want to be blindly repeating traditions without knowing why? Maybe the ramifications are huge, and we just don’t know it. As Unitarian Universalists, we commit ourselves to thinking things through, to engaging in a search for truth and meaning, to examining our lives and the way we live them.

The authors of the book from which I read earlier have dissected almost every aspect of currently-practiced church traditions in order to determine how they relate to the practices of the earliest Christians and to evaluate whether or not these current practices are supported by the text of the Christian Bible. We, here in this room, are not so concerned about biblical precedent. We believe in a living tradition, one that may change and evolve, with the idea that revelation is not sealed.

For this reason, it is perhaps even more important to critically examine and distinguish between what aspects of the way we do things in this congregation

contribute to our spiritual growth, opening our hearts, becoming ever more caring and compassionate and nurturing our relationship to that which is larger than ourselves, engaging together in our search for truth and meaning, for greater spirituality... and which traditions are distractions or lead us away from personal and spiritual growth, lead us away from a direct experience of the sacred.

To paraphrase 19th century writer and minister J.C. Ryle, experience provides painful proof that traditions, once called into being, are first called useful, then become necessary, and, at last, too often, become idols, and all must bow down to them or be punished.

Jesus' basic message was simple; love one another and love God. He was not afraid to question the status quo. He was a revolutionary who defied the traditions of the scribes and the Pharisees. He refused to blindly accept religious conformity. In doing so, he brought change to people's understanding of God and the nature of their relationships to each other.

Early Christian worshippers, when they gathered together, were called *ekklesia*, "church gatherings," but they didn't have church buildings. They met in small groups in homes. Their focus was on practicing what Jesus had taught and on venerating him as the one who had sacrificed himself for their sakes.

Up until the second century, the church had no official leadership. It had leaders. But the leadership was unofficial; there were no religious "offices" or sociological slots to fill. Everyone participated fully in the worship gatherings.

What happened to this simple and direct style of worship, which was so different from what we think of as a church worship service?

The first Christians turned away from worldly ways and the common culture. But, after the itinerant "church-planters" had established these groups, it was difficult for the Christian worshippers to avoid being influenced by the culture around them. And life as a Christian was also challenging because they were persecuted by the Romans for the first couple hundred years.

So we can't really blame them for warming up to the new emperor of Rome, Constantine. We don't know exactly how he came to embrace Christianity, but in

312 he granted all Christians freedom of worship. He wanted peace in his empire. He figured that Christianity needed to become more established, more reputable. So, Constantine began ordering the construction of church buildings. In this way, Christianity would gain legitimacy as a religion.

He created nine churches in Rome and many others in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Constantinople. He brought to the Christian faith and its buildings the idea of the holy site, which was based on the sacred Roman shrine. The churches were patterned after the basilica, the common Roman government buildings, designed after Greek temples.

Constantine may have converted to Christianity, but he never abandoned his pagan beliefs. We know that he continued to worship the sun, for example. Constantine decreed that Sunday would be a day of rest, in honor of Mithra, the Roman sun god.

Church buildings were the first step away from true corporate (group) worship, where every member is equal. If we could look inside an early Christian basilica, we would see that at the front was an elevated platform where the clergy ministered. There was also a rail that separated the clergy from the laity. Now the clergy performed the acts of worship while the laity looked on as spectators.

The pomp and ritual of the Roman imperial court were incorporated into the Christian liturgy. So the clergy were preceded by men or boys who carried candles and burning incense. The processional included special processional music. The clergy now wore special garments –which happened to be the same garments of the Roman officials. Worship became professional, dramatic and ceremonial. In the process, Christians lost the intimacy and openness of their small, spontaneous gatherings.

It was not until the 6th century that the Catholic Mass was shaped. According to the writer, historian and philosopher Will Durant, the Catholic Mass was “based partly on the Judaic Temple service [and] partly on Greek mystery rituals.” Durant adds that the Mass was deeply steeped in pagan magical thinking as well as Greek drama.

It was the Protestant reformers, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, who protested some of the Catholic practices, and gave us our familiar liturgy, the elements included in a typical Protestant worship service. The high point of the Catholic Mass was the Eucharist, the symbolic consumption of wine and bread, representing the blood and body of Christ. Only the priest was allowed to engage in this ritual. Luther allowed the congregation to partake of the bread and the cup, but he also changed the focus of the liturgy from the Eucharist to the sermon. He wrote, “The preaching and teaching of God’s Word is the most important part of Divine service.”

John Calvin adjusted Luther’s liturgy by adding the collection of money following the sermon. He also stressed the centrality of preaching. And it was Calvin who contributed the somber attitude that many Christians are encouraged to adopt when they enter the church building. The early Puritans, our Unitarian forebears, were known to fine children who smiled in church!

The leaders of the earliest Christians were recognized by their service and spiritual maturity, not by holding titles or offices. After the original church leaders died, though, local presbyters were designated, and the Christians drifted toward the organizational patterns of the surrounding culture. During Constantine’s reign, priests and bishops received the same honors as the highest Roman officials. He also ordered that the clergy receive fixed annual allowances – ministerial pay!

The clergy became set apart from the laity. The Reformers decried this split, but in their practice, they retained it. Viola and Barna, co-authors of Pagan Christianity?, say that one of the consequences of this setting apart is that, “Tremendous psychological factors make laypeople feel that ministry is the responsibility of the pastor.”

Viola and Barna offer the radical notion that neither the clergy nor the building is necessary for a religious gathering. “Contrast the overhead of a traditional church,” they say, “which includes salaried staff and church buildings, with the overhead of a house church. Rather than such overhead siphoning off [more than half] of the [members’] monetary giving, [the house church’s] operating costs amount to a small percentage of the budget, freeing [most] of its shared money for delivering real services like ministry, mission and outreach to the world.”

As an alternative to our modern churches, Viola and Barna imagine what they call an “organic church.” “In organic church life,” they say, “the meetings look different every week... [members] do not plan a specific order of worship. Instead, everyone is free to function, share, participate, and minister spiritually during gatherings, so the creativity expressed in them is endless.

“Participants do not know who will stand up and share next, nor what they will share. There might be skits; there might be poems read; there might be new songs introduced and sung; there might be exhortations, testimonies, short teachings, revelations, and prophetic words...The most meaningful meetings are generally those in which everyone participates and functions...”

Very different from a typical Protestant or even Unitarian Universalist service. The idea of a completely spontaneous gathering where everyone participates both fascinates and terrifies me, to be honest! But, let’s also remember: The Unitarian Fellowship movement began as a grass-roots effort, with small groups meeting in homes to discuss and share religious ideas. Maybe not so different, really.

I will leave you with some questions. Are there things we could do differently to be a congregation that brings back the most valuable aspects of the *ekklesia*, the gathered community? One that:

- Builds us together into a close-knit, beloved community
- Transforms us
- Enables every member to participate fully in a spiritual way
- A congregation that has a community life that is vibrant, thriving, authentic and where the members grow to love each other more and more
- A congregation that is focused on our mission: to unite in fellowship to enrich our lives and to inspire the larger community through living out our Unitarian Universalist Principles

In order to be your best selves as a religious community, do you need a building? Do you need a minister? A music director? A religious educator? If so, are you prepared to support this congregation at the level necessary to provide the space and the professional staff?

Next Sunday, there will be a congregational meeting to determine the answers to some of these questions. I urge all of you to reflect on these questions.

Our Fellowship has evolved, directly and indirectly, from some strange twists and turns of history. We are what we are today because of everything that has come before, both pagan and Christian. But we are not stuck with our traditions. We can choose what is best for us, for this fellowship. May it be so.