

Discovering Unitarian Universalism from Catholic and Jewish Perspectives

Patrick T. O'Neill and Linda R. Weltner

People join Unitarian Universalist congregations from many different religious backgrounds. For some individuals, their childhood religion provided a strong moral or ethical foundation for growing up. For others it continues to offer religious sustenance in their daily lives. For all, Unitarian Universalism is an affirming place for their growing spirituality. Discover how two people from Catholic and Jewish backgrounds learned who they are as individuals and as Unitarian Universalists.

From Catholic Roots: A New Religious Home
Patrick T. O'Neill

People are often startled to meet a Unitarian Universalist minister with a name like Patrick Thomas Aquinas O'Neill. As my name inescapably reveals, I come from a family that is very Irish and devoutly Catholic. Though my own religious journey has taken me on a different spiritual road than that of my immigrant parents, I remain proud of my family heritage and grateful for the deeply religious upbringing my family provided.

My education was typical of the American Catholic school system of the 1950s and 1960s. My elementary school teachers were the School Sisters of Notre Dame. I attended a Carmelite prep school for boys, and graduated from a Jesuit college. I was an altar boy until I was sixteen.

I attended college from 1965 to 1969 and came of age during that turbulent decade when America's social and religious values were so vehemently tested.

As a sincere young Catholic, I struggled as all my friends did during those years with the profound moral upheavals of our time. I found I could not in good conscience cooperate with my country's military activity in Southeast Asia. I was also eager to participate in the civil rights struggles being championed by Martin Luther King Jr.

I was proud of Catholic activists and social protesters like the Berrigan brothers and Dorothy Day, who were leaders on the picket lines of justice in the sixties. But in truth, I felt there was not enough institutional support for those brave Catholic radicals who were willing to speak out against the moral injustices in our society. Very few American bishops and virtually no American cardinals were walking on those protest lines. Why was that? I wondered.

I felt increasingly lonely and alienated as a young "radical" in my own church. It was ironic that my keen sense of moral outrage was a direct product of my Catholic religious education. Perhaps I was an idealist, but from my earliest lessons in catechism, I was taught to follow my conscience in matters of moral decision-making. Yet, when the most

important moral decisions of my life came due ("should I declare myself a conscientious objector?"), I felt very alone.

Eventually, my discomfort with the church's teaching on matters such as birth control, abortion rights, equality for women, and hierarchical authority in all questions of morals led me out of Catholicism. This was no easy step for one who was raised in the belief that the Catholic church was "the one true faith."

For some time after I left Catholicism, I despaired of ever finding another church where I could feel spiritually at home. I still considered myself a radical Christian, even though my theology was broadening to include non-Christian sources and ideas. I did not go on any grand theological search for the "perfect church" because I was frankly skeptical about the notion of church itself, doubtful that there existed anywhere the kind of religious community that I needed.

Imagine my delight in discovering how wrong I was, that there was in fact a church that welcomed wandering souls like me!

It was a close friend of mine, one whose intelligence and values I very much respected, who first invited me to visit a Unitarian Universalist church one Sunday. "This church is different," he told me. "I think you'll like it."

I cannot adequately express my initial joy in finding a religious community that honored my personal beliefs, my own moral intelligence, and my own religious odyssey. I had the experience that people so often describe when they first encounter a Unitarian Universalist congregation-I felt I had "come home" to a place I had never been before.

I believe we evolve as religious people. One's life is a continuum, one pathway leading on to another. Looking back now, I know that my differences with Catholic doctrine were truly irreconcilable.

I loved the church of my childhood, and I am eternally grateful for the sound moral education I received there. Whatever I now know of faith and hope and charity, of integrity and passion for justice and peace, of the value of prayer and aesthetic worship, I first learned from parents and teachers who were shaped by their Catholic faith. I eventually parted ways with their church in my young adulthood, and I was lucky to find in Unitarian Universalism a religious home that more comfortably and closely reflected my adult values.

A fair number of former Catholics are finding their way into Unitarian Universalist congregations these days. If you are among them, know that you will find here the company of those intimately familiar with your journey.

A Place We Could Bring Our Jewishness
Linda R. Weltner

"What religion are you?" asks a new friend. "Last week you mentioned your minister and now you're planning to celebrate the Jewish holidays. Could you please clear up the confusion?"

Yes, I can.

Both my parents were Jewish. So is my husband. I was confirmed at a reform temple. I was also a camp counselor at Camp Young Judea, where I came to have a great appreciation for the beauty of ritual, the holiness of the Sabbath, and the pleasures of communal worship. Back in 1971, unable to find a compatible Jewish temple in our town, my husband and I joined with six other families to form a home-centered Jewish religious community, and for the next twelve years we studied our traditions and celebrated the Jewish holidays together.

At the same time, we were drawn to our local Unitarian Universalist church because of its strong moral stance against the Vietnam War. Soon we were attending services regularly, intrigued by the inclusivity of the services and the variety of religious backgrounds in the congregation. We found the sermons thought-provoking and the atmosphere of religious tolerance comforting. It was a place we could bring our Jewishness as well as our interest in Eastern religions.

The Unitarian belief that revelation did not end in Biblical times but is a process occurring in the present as well made it the ideal place to synthesize a variety of religious doctrines. Without dogma, it was possible to see the way all religions embraced a common core of ethical and moral understanding. My husband and I came to feel that not only the Old and New Testament, but the Book of the Tao, Thomas Berry's *The Dream of the Earth*, and Matthew Fox's *Creation Spirituality* were religious documents that enriched and enlarged the spiritual dimension of our lives.

What might be considered by some as a conflict of religious loyalties never felt that way to us. The Jewish members of our church have full access to an open pulpit and the congregation happily celebrates the major Jewish holidays with us. One year Judith, a professional storyteller, ran a dramatic Passover Seder for which the Sunday school made charoset, the apple and nut mixture that represents the clay from which our enslaved ancestors made bricks. I run the candlelight Channukah service every year, and during the three years I wrote a column for our church newsletter, I often quoted Heschel, Buber, and other Jewish theologians.

To a unanimously positive response.

As far as I know, our multiple religious affiliations cause no problem for our friends. Because we live in a small town, our friends of all religions are friends with each other. We move in social circles in which religion neither defines nor limits participation.

The world I grew up in was very different. Brought up to assume that everyone quite naturally preferred to be with people of the same faith, my parents and I had only Jewish

friends. As a teenager, I knew almost nothing about other religions and what I did know seemed bizarre. That was the way things were in the 1950s; religious groups maintained a relatively peaceful but distant co-existence, broken only by the shock of an occasional inter-religious romance.

That pattern has changed as many religious education programs offer courses on comparative religion, including visits to local temples, churches, and mosques. For the first time in history, children are aware that the tenets of their religion are not universal. With intermarriage so common, many hold side by side in their heads the different beliefs held by their parents. Mixing with classmates and neighbors, they discover that people they like and respect have various ideas about the afterlife, the place of sexuality, and the nature of God.

Today children are born into a swirl of cultures, races, and religions. Whether we encourage or limit independence of thought, our children take for granted the bustling marketplace of ideas where so many religious orientations compete for legitimacy. I've come to realize just how many people are choosing to construct a sustaining philosophy of life from many different beliefs and values.

I met a man once who told me that he and his wife attend her Catholic church at Christmas and Easter. They joined a Unitarian church because of the support they found there for feminism and social action. But when they feel the need for peace and quiet, they attend a Quaker meeting. Others at our table added their own unique tales—one man had hired an unaffiliated rabbi to prepare his child for a Bar Mitzvah at home; one family was attempting to incorporate a new stepparent's faith; a Jewish-Methodist intermarriage was learning to channel the ardor of a "born again" grandmother; one woman had presided over a memorial service for her husband without benefit of clergy.

They all felt very satisfied with their choices.

As for me, I'm grateful that intermarriage-of my brother and sister and our two daughters—hasn't extinguished our religious life or kept us from blossoming into one big extended family. We gather at holidays to celebrate the common spiritual longings that gave birth to Channukah and Christmas, Easter and Passover. It feels right to have my daughter's husband, born a Catholic, by our side in church on Sunday mornings.

Don't get me started on the grandchildren.

This unconventional state of affairs was set in motion years ago when our founding fathers made freedom of religion the linchpin of American democracy. I doubt any of them ever dreamed then that so many of us would interpret freedom of religion to mean the right to embrace as much of many religions as we like.

In some places, this would make you an outlaw.

In the Unitarian Universalist church, it makes you one of us.

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