

Beware of the Dogma

by Doug Cartwright

Not too long ago, Dr. Wayne Robinson, our Minister Emeritus, delivered a sermon with the underlying message that we need to honor our religious upbringing, even if we do not follow or believe the same as we did in the past. I initially had trouble with that concept for I had a past littered with dogma: confirmation classes in which I was required to recite the Nicene Creed and Apostles' Creed; Sunday services in which I was shuttled off to "Sunday School" to have my head stuffed with more dogma while the adults were living it up (or so I thought) upstairs; and the worst indignity of all, as the price of admission to this world of salvation and everlasting joy and hallelujah (and finally to join the joyful world of adults who were not relegated to Sunday School), being required to go to my first confession and divulge all of the sins and iniquities of my early teenage years to the one person I didn't want knowing the depths of my innermost sinful soul - my minister. This was the person who purported to be our spiritual and moral compass; the person who hid his eyes when the girls of the confirmation class propped the text of the Apostles' Creed behind their purses to hide the fact that they were reading the Creed, not reciting it; and worst of all, the person who, when I asked how the Bible explained the existence of the dinosaurs millions of years before Adam and Eve walked the earth, replied that with God all things are possible, an explanation I found to be totally insufficient, and to tell the truth, as dogmatic a proclamation that ever was.

Well not wanting to contradict Wayne, I tried to go along with his call to honor my past religious upbringing; and see where it got me. And a strange thing happened: I didn't buy it. Oh, I realized that my religious indoctrination was in line with my grandparents strict Lutheranism, Missouri Synod mind you! And as such, they and my parents were simply following the tenets of what they themselves were taught, but I still rebelled against the heavy-handedness of parents who wanted their children to fit in, like not wearing matching chartreuse clothes on St. Patrick's Day or an orange Nehru jacket in high school (both of which I'm guilty of.) And now, with the advantage of 70 years, I'm ready to concede that my religious upbringing didn't do me any harm. In fact it probably contributed, in a twisted sort of way, to my independent thinking.

I was a bright, inquisitive child (if I do say so myself). Oh, I accepted the lessons of teachers and other adults, but basically I knew when to question. My fifth grade science teacher one day declared that he had learned a new word, "enhance," which, he said, meant to destroy or debunk an existing theory. That didn't sound right to me, I don't know why; but when I got a chance to look it up, my suspicions proved correct: it meant exactly the opposite. I never told my teacher what I had learned. That would be gloating; but I never forgot the lesson. I learned to think for myself and question things that were debatable to my way of thinking.

If you'll indulge me, I want to bring up another potentially traumatic aspect of my childhood. My parents already

had a son when they learned my mother was pregnant. My mother wanted desperately to have a girl, and my aunt, my mother's sister, was also expecting about the same time. Both mothers-to-be wanted to name their daughters, "Cynthia." I suppose it was the name du jour in the mid forties. When I turned up first, I 'm sure my mother had decided she'd won the "Cynthia" sweepstakes, but no dice. My mother had not planned on any other name, so she asked her nurse if she had any favorite boys' names. My brother had been named after my father, so that avenue had been closed; and when the nurse suggested Douglas because it was her boyfriend's name, the matter was quickly settled. Now you may think that this incident would traumatize me; and it might have if my brother had had his way. As we grew older, he flaunted the fact that he had several volumes of baby books to my one, and the only entry in my book was my name. He taunted me with circumstantial evidence that I was adopted, and I'm sure these things affected me at the time; however I came to realize that with a namesake comes expectations. Being named after my mother's nurses' boyfriend, brought freedom to be my own person and not live up to anyone else's standards.

So what do these items of my ancient history have to do with the title of my piece, "Beware of the Dogma?" Dogma is a piece of preconceived belief masquerading as fact. Let me repeat that. Dogma is a piece of preconceived belief masquerading as fact. If one is guilty of bending to the belief that dogma is indeed fact, one is handcuffed and stifled in preconceived and predictable action. John Henry

Newman said, "Man will die upon dogma but will not fall victim to a conclusion." Accepting dogma as established fact means that you have given up the right, nay the obligation, to think for yourself.

The military drills its recruits to act blindly without thinking. Religious sects and cults demand blind loyalty. "Drinking the Kool-aid" became a buzz phrase for accepting a dogma that was unquestionable; and you saw how the residents of JonesTown ended up. How many of you sitting here can easily recite the Nicene Creed or the Apostles' Creed? How many of you can say the "Hail Mary" or the "Our Father?" How many of you have seen television exposes on Scientology or the Branch Dravidians? And I'm sure that you are painfully aware of the radical Islamists destruction of Palmyra and other ancient holy sites or the attempted assassination of Malala Yousayev. Or the abduction of scores of girls by the Boko Haram. All were done in the misguided belief that religious dogma dictated their action.

To accept dogma as established fact is to surrender to intellectual laziness. The person who accepts dogma is giving up his right to think for himself, whether it's questioning the existence of dinosaurs or accepting the inferiority of women. And it's not isolated to backward third world countries. Dylan Roof, the young man who shot and killed nine people in a Charleston, South Carolina Church last year, confessed that he had to do it because his victims were black and were usurping the natural superiority of white people. He stated in his confession that "Someone

had to do it.” Just last month a North Carolina man traveled to Washington and shot up a pizza parlor because he fell victim to a fake news story about Hillary Clinton and John Podesta running a child exploitation ring out of that store. These are not examples of religious dogmas, per se; but they are examples of twisted beliefs that are passed as fact, the very definition of dogma.

Diane and I taught for thirty-five years in Goshen, Indiana. When we retired, we made it known (casually) among friends and colleagues that we were attracted to a denomination known as Unitarian Universalism which we had heard about from one of our students. He was very bright and recognized in our classroom discussions that both Diane and I shared much of the UU philosophy. Diane and I were familiar with Unitarianism through studies of Thoreau, Emerson, and Alcott; but really did not know anything about Unitarian Universalism. We were intrigued. The student did not try to proselytize. He just explained the UU philosophy and let us draw our own conclusions. And, indeed, it seemed that UU's were heavily influenced by self-reliance and individual responsibility, the very opposite of group-think which, incidentally, is a huge part of dogmatic thinking. In one conversation with a fellow staff member, whom I knew to be an evangelical, I explained in answer to her question of what drew us to UUism, that I'd always had trouble with the idea that someone like Gandhi should be denied entrance to heaven because he didn't embrace Christ as God and someone who could be a mass murderer could gain entry through a dying confession and acceptance of Christ as

his savior. She looked at me and said incredulously, “Oh, I don’t want to think about that.” She was a walking example of intellectual laziness brought on by a strict adherence to dogma.

When Diane and I discovered All Faiths fifteen years ago, mostly because of Wayne’s op-ed pieces in the News-Press, my brother asked what attracted us to this denomination. I explained the openness and acceptability that we perceived to be the foundation of All Faiths. He waited patiently for me to finish, then asked, “But what about the dogma? Where is the dogma?” For him, dogma was a requirement for a religion. For us it was anathema. I tried to explain that that was exactly the reason we were attracted to the UU denomination - the absence of dogma; but his eyes had glazed over in incredulity.

If you look in the grey hymnal and turn to the page just before the hymns, you will see the seven principles which guide Unitarian Universalists. These are not dogmatic statements; they are values, credos, and guides to our denomination. We strive to be better persons through living according to these values, but they are not strictures which, if broken, bring hellfire and damnation raining down from above. They are important because we, individually, think they are important. In short, they define us.

With this I close. The Stewardship Team is launching the 2017-8 pledge drive today. Last year we successfully reached out to the congregation and achieved an 80+% return. Many of you, who gave generously but who never

felt it important to pledge, were spurred to make a pledge so our Board and Finance Committee could build a budget which was workable and met the needs of our congregation. We held cottage meetings, distributed brochures, and pledge cards, and emphasized the importance of getting accurate figures on which to build a budget - a budget that covers salaries, utilities, building maintenance, insurance, social activities, social justice initiatives, UUA association, and all of the myriad things that an active, vibrant congregation can aspire to.

This year, we want to do even better; but it will take everyone's commitment to return a pledge card indicating how much you will pledge and how often you intend to fulfill that pledge. Most give weekly or monthly, some like to give a lump sum once or twice a year, some like to do an electronic transfer through their bank or financial institution, and some take a tax free benefit through contributing through their IRA's, 401 K's, or 403 B's.

No matter what and how you decide to give, the Board, the Stewardship Team, and the Finance Committee need the information from each of you in order to build a viable budget for the fiscal year 2017-8. Please take the brochure and the pledge card, look it over, and decide what you will be able to contribute of your treasure. Return the pledge anytime within the next month. The pledge drive ends Founders' Day, February 19. And remember...Beware of the Dogma!

