

Popeularity

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By the Rev. CJ McGregor

On July 23, 2017

Pope Francis is a Unitarian Universalist. I've been studying him since 2013 and just now make this claim. Here's why: Francis writes, "I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I have never been one to stay within the bounds of my own faith. It is important to see how congregations worldwide work, what their leaders do, and the effect the leadership has on the community around it." That sounds like a Unitarian to me. I've done my research on Pope Francis. My conclusions solidified some of my overriding questions, which included how Pope Francis has changed the Catholic religion and if it's even possible for religions to transform, without losing credibility in which its foundation was built? If I were his attorney in Unitarian court I would highlight a few behaviors that might sway the judge to declare Francis a Unitarian.

1. He is the first non-European Pope in forever — nothing against Europeans, but a leader of such a massive, diverse group of people should be subject to change.
2. Acts of humility are kind of his thing. And they happen way too frequently to be misinterpreted as 'photo op's'. Pope Francis has been spotted kissing the feet of homeless, kneeling to acknowledge convicted felons, embracing the extremely disfigured...
3. He utilizes media and vice versa. Francis has a twitter and his first tweet asked the general public to 'pray for him'.
4. He has made radical statements (for Catholicism) such as, in response to gays: "If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" Bill Maher says, "I think it's like anything else, when you get to know gay people they don't come off as gay, they come off as people. You stop being anti-gay. And who has more gay friends and coworkers than a Pope?" and David Letterman says, "Let those who are without sin cast the first musical."
5. He's acknowledged the possibility of evolution alongside creation; in response to gender inequality in the Church he stated, "The feminine genius is needed whenever we make important decisions."; in the case of atheists or non-believers he has been inviting: "God is in everyone's life. Even the life of a person has been a disaster—destroyed by vices, drugs...God is in this persons life".
6. Pope Francis played a crucial role in mending the foreign relations between The United States and Cuba.
7. He just exemplifies ideal human behavior rather than preaching what no one essentially knows to be certain, and in return the Catholic Church has received an increase in likability

Time magazine once named Pope Francis Time's Man of the Year which in lies a miracle. People read *Time* magazine again. He is called The People's Pope. He has gone beyond *Time* magazine and has been featured on the cover of the GLBT magazine the *Advocate* and *Rolling Stone* magazine. Jimmy Hendrix, Mick Jagger, and Pope Francis have become the *Rolling Stone* holy trinity. Jon Stuart hails him based on his economic principles, many Unitarian Universalists blog positively about him, and even one article in the satirical blog The Apocryphal Press stated that Pope Francis was actually applying to be a Unitarian Universalist Minister because "he is a very undisciplined person." Some have been on the lookout for a rabble-rouser as Pope. They've been watching for a real zealot capable of spearheading a restoration of uncompromising, conservative Catholicism.

Pope Francis is a different kind of Pope. During his first year in office, he reached out to all religions, meeting with leaders from the Orthodox Church, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and also Jews, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus. He even extended the olive branch toward atheists and agnostics. He made headlines worldwide after he appeared to cede ground on a defining battlefield of our time. "Who am I to judge them?" These are issues that previous Popes, especially Benedict XVI, had generally taken conservative stances on. By contrast, Francis seems gentle, liberal and inclusive. This is undoubtedly a movement and one that I'm calling Popeularity.

Of course this Pope has not changed his viewpoints, on many of the issues core to UU social justice work, like marriage equality, and equal rights for women in priesthood and health issues, but his focus on works and justice cannot be ignored. This pope has moved from the Vatican into a hostel, traded in his Mercedes-Benz for a Ford Focus. Jimmy Kimmell asks, "How crazy is it that the Pope has a car? Imagine driving through Rome and a Ford Focus cuts in front of you. You flip the guy off, and it's the Pope!" Francis pointed out that trickle down economics breed inequality. He has set an example for religious leaders all over the world, and those who seek truth and justice.

Francis has shocked Vatican officials by urging Catholics to stop focusing on the sins of homosexuality and contraception, and instead to take up issues of social justice, in particular helping the poor. He has issued direct criticisms of capitalism and urged greater tolerance. The Pope just might like to be a UU as he's never felt at home in a rigid, dogmatic system. UU's are much more in line with his ethical vision. And we do a really super coffee hour.

What can we learn from Francis? He has a lot of time left to make big mistakes and he even expects that he will, but can we learn from a man who is very adamant that he is not perfect? And will our differences of opinion over core issues stop us from growing because of his example? We are no stranger to social justice work and we teach acceptance and work to empower the disenfranchised, and support human rights. But the question I have for Unitarian Universalists is this, as a tradition, as a movement, are we bruised, hurting, and dirty due to our work towards justice, or are we just clinging on for security? Do we do the work or like the idea of the work.

If we leave with just one thing this morning it is abundance. Francis tells us "The final measure of abundance is not what we have. The final measure of abundance is the openness of our hearts." Thus, the work of achieving abundance begins with the opening of our hearts. I knew nothing of the Pope before he became Pope Francis. And, according to him, I probably wouldn't

have liked him, I probably wouldn't have been inspired by him had I known who he was before becoming Pope. I am inspired by his enduring patience, his humility, his ability to suspend judgement and create a kinder more loving church. How do we cultivate such hearts?

Embrace uncertainty. Be willing to doubt. Pope Francis said, "If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty, then this is not good.... It is not good if one has the answers to all the questions. That is, if I am absolutely convinced of the truth and the correctness of my position, then my heart is a reversed funnel, letting others in only in dribs and drabs; letting in only those who agree with me. If I embrace uncertainty and am willing to doubt myself, then I make space for others in my life. I make space for my own growth. That is abundance.

Value people more than rules. Pope Francis said, "We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods.... The dogmatic and moral teachings of the church are not all equivalent. The church's pastoral ministry cannot be obsessed with the transmission of a disjointed multitude of doctrines to be imposed insistently." He said, "I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds." That is, if I insist on following rules before getting to know people, before building relationships, before meeting peoples' immediate needs, before healing wounds; if I insist on the higher value of my truths, my principles, my doctrines, my faith, my power, my world-view, and thereby fail to encounter the person right in front of me, then my heart is a reversed funnel. I lock out multitudes. If I put people first and not worry about the rules, that is abundance.

Accompany people, whoever they are. Pope Francis said, "A person once asked me, in a provocative manner, if I approved of homosexuality. I replied with another question: 'Tell me: when God looks at a gay person, does he endorse the existence of this person with love, or reject and condemn this person?'] Perhaps the greatest gift we have to give, yet which in the midst of scarcity is so profoundly difficult to give, is our presence, our ability to accompany people who need accompaniment, our companionship. If I cannot dedicate at least a portion of my life to accompanying others, then my heart is a reversed funnel. But if I can go when called, if I can literally be there for others and welcome their accompaniment when I need it, that is abundance.

If we are building something sustainable to secure and promote peace, nonviolence, justice, fairness, equality, compassion, reason, liberty, freedom, healing and love—fearless, generous, unlimited, undying love; we are living with big hearts open. Then we are living with abundance. This is the message of the movement I'm calling Popeularity.

Let us continue to stretch ourselves to be the accepting and compassionate people we are. Let us recognize our allies, those who walk with us for justice and compassion and not theology. We need not think alike to love alike. Francis is teaching us that religions can transform, and in my opinion, should! Pope Franco has simply given the Bible a different interpretation, which parallels modern times and also just basic, common good behavior. Let us recognize such transformation in religion and ourselves.

May it be so

