

Unitarian Universalist Christians in the Philippines
by the Rev. Ann Schranz
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
March 23, 2008

The empty tomb . . . what a powerful image! In her poem entitled “Easter,” the Rev. Lynn Ungar writes:

“What I want to know is simply this:

Who rolled away the stone?

Did Jesus, reviving from the touch of Judas’ kiss

Turn miracle to muscle on his own?

Or did some savior of the Savior move the rock

To let life enter from outside –

Resurrection as a sort of picking of the lock

That separates the bridegroom from his waiting bride?

Perhaps the stone itself got bored

With waiting for a happy ending to the story,

And rolled itself away to set the body it had stored

Upon the royal road to new life and eternal glory.

You might say it does not matter,

But when you are waiting in the dark

A person wants to know if Life is company or caller,

The friend you trust to seek you, or the waiting spark.”¹

Religion – any religion, including this one -- can be a tomb, an unchanging place, unchanging except for decay, that is. Religion – any religion, including this one -- can also be an open tomb, a trailhead, so to speak, for the hike that despair takes. The Rev. Toribio Quimada, the man who carried the Universalist spark of Life in the Philippines until his murder in 1988, wrote the song “Maglipay Universalist” (“Be Joyful, Universalist”), a song which includes these verses:

¹ “Easter” in *Blessing the Bread: Meditations* by Lynn Ungar, 1995.

“So many rigid Biblicists restrict our God to ancient days. Often both [Catholic] priest and Calvinists are preaching narrow only ways. Remember Universalist, the sun [sun, spelled s-u-n] of God has many rays. To teach the hope that is for all, proclaim the Universal call. Heaven is Universalist, including middle, rich, and poor. It is not being on a list that opens up the divine door. Lift up your hearts to loving grace that reaches out to ev’ry race. To teach the hope that is for all, proclaim the Universal call.”²

This morning, we celebrate Unitarian Universalists in the Philippines. Rev. Rebecca Quimada Sienes, the former president of the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines and the daughter of Toribio Quimada, says that Unitarian Universalists in the Philippines are liberal Christians. Toribio Quimada emphasized that “God is Love” and preached that there is no eternal condemnation. In God’s love everyone is saved, and the Christian teaching of eternal damnation is irrelevant.³ In the Unitarian Universalist theological mix in the Philippines, “spiritual humanism” is also represented.⁴

Bob Guerrero is the Congregational President of the Bicutan Congregation in Manila, and about six months ago he delivered a sermon entitled “My Jesus.” The sermon is on the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines website, and I commend it to you.⁵ Bob Guerrero said, “My Jesus is my Lord and Savior. I am not afraid to say this. I may no longer believe that Jesus is the only begotten son of God, but I do think he is my Lord and Savior. I try to live my life according to his teachings. That makes Jesus my Lord. I believe that in following Jesus, I am saved from a life of sadness, selfishness and suffering, both for my self and for others. That makes him my Savior. I don’t know if he will judge me on those final days, but I do hope that he will lead me to a fulfilling life in this lifetime.”

This congregation is one of about half a dozen Unitarian Universalist congregations that are partnered with a Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Philippines. We have the opportunity to develop our faith and commitments as we learn about and support the faith and commitments of the Calapayan Unitarian Universalist congregation on the island of Negros in the Philippines. We have a chance to grapple with issues of cultural differences, religious differences, and economic disparities. How will we engage with Unitarian Universalists halfway around the world in an open hearted way that honors their integrity, as well as our own? How relevant is Unitarian Universalism, here and there? This adventure will have trials we cannot imagine, and it will have benefits we cannot imagine. One thing is certain – We will be stretched in the process.

² *Maglipay Universalist: A History of the Universalist Church of the Philippines*, Fredric John Muir, Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, 333 Dubois Road, Annapolis, Maryland, 2001, p. 188.

³ The comments by Rev. Siennes are from a November 29, 2007 Skype cast conversation (a phone conversation taking place over the Internet). A summary of the conversation was provided to me by Lee Boeke Burke.

⁴ Tet Gallardo of the University of the Philippines made this observation in the November 29, 2007 conversation.

⁵ See <http://uuphilippines.org/> and follow the link to the sermon by Bob Guerrero.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines is largely a church of poor rural peasants. The Rev. Fredric Muir writes in the book *Maglipay Universalist* that peasant life in a village is somewhat comparable to small-town rural life in the United States 200 years ago. The day begins before sunrise and ends at sunset. “Children attend the local elementary school but high school is optional, especially since distance is often prohibitive; public high schools are regional and closer private schools charge tuition.”⁶ Five influences shape Filipino Unitarian Universalist theology: Roman Catholicism, oppression, independent Protestantism, faith healing, and absence of a common heritage.⁷ “Faith healing is a religious and social phenomenon by which many UUCP members find Unitarian Universalism appealing and sustaining. At least half of UUCP ministers practice faith healing as do some lay people, while virtually all Unitarian Universalists in the Philippines believe in it.”⁸ We will be exploring these influences and more in the upcoming adult religious education sessions.

While most Unitarian Universalists in the Philippines live in small rural villages, there is an emerging church in urban Manila. I recently talked with the Rev. Joseph Santos Lyons, who completed his ministerial internship in the Philippines. He characterized the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines as one megachurch with 28 “satellites” (congregations). To my surprise, he said that the church is rapidly moving into “post-Christian” culture, similar to the culture of Unitarian Universalists in the United States, especially among young people, among people who live in urban areas, and among middle class people.⁹

What does “post-Christian” mean and why should we care? The Rev. Dan Harper has pulled together a definition of “post-Christian” on his blog, which is called “Yet Another Unitarian Universalist.” He says, “Many sources, especially Christian writers, use “post-Christian” in a pejorative sense, or with a pejorative connotation; but these should not be taken as definitive definitions, for there are substantial numbers of persons who call themselves post-Christian in a positive sense.”¹⁰

On most Sundays, I would rather break a leg than quote a dictionary definition in a sermon, but I make an exception today. Some of us were raised in the Christian tradition, and some of us have “unresolved issues” about our experiences. To be blunt, if we do not work through any unresolved issues about our religious upbringing, we risk limiting the growth of Unitarian Universalism by demeaning others.

⁶ *Maglipay Universalist: A History of the Universalist Church of the Philippines*, Fredric John Muir, Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, 333 Dubois Road, Annapolis, Maryland, 2001, p. 58.

⁷ *Maglipay Universalist*, p. 55.

⁸ *Maglipay Universalist*, p. 61

⁹ Phone conversation with Rev. Joseph Santos Lyons on March 13, 2008.

¹⁰ See http://www.danielharper.org/blog/?page_id=463.

Unitarian Universalism is not about putting down faith. Rather, it is about how “faith” and “lack of faith” can energize each other and can expand what is possible in our individual and collective search for truth and meaning. Rather than being “ex-“something (ex-Catholic, ex-Baptist, ex-Lutheran), let us consider being “post-“something (post-Christian, for example, if that is the shoe that fits). In more general terms, the distinction between “ex-“ and “post-“ is worth looking at as we continue developing.

Here is the Rev. Dan Harper’s definition of “post-Christian” as a noun:

“*n.* [20th C. back formation from *Christian*.] 1. Someone whom Christians would say is not a Christian, but whom non-Christians consider Christian . . . 2. A type of postmodern religion or spirituality with roots in the Christian tradition (also called “postmodern Christian spirituality”). 3. In certain cases, a non-theist or atheist who follows the ethical teachings of Jesus.”

Here is his definition of “post-Christian” as an adjective:

“*adj.* 1. Pertaining to or derived from the moral, religious, and/or ethical teachings of Jesus, but retaining an openness to other moral, religious, and/or ethical teachings. 2. Heretical, not adhering to traditional Christian creeds; especially including the heresies of unitarianism and universalism, which are still considered heterodox by most mainstream Christians. 3. Post-modern interpretations of Christianity. 4. Pluralistic and no longer dominated by Christianity, where Christianity formerly held sway; e.g., “a post-Christian society.” 5. Pertaining to one who tries to live according to Jesus’s teachings, but who chooses to distance himself/herself from institutional Christianity by refusing to be called ‘Christian.’”

Speaking personally, I do not call myself Christian. Yet upon reflection, I may one day choose to call myself post-Christian. It is too early to tell. Why do I complicate a sermon about our Philippine partner church by dragging in something about post-Christianity? I do this because of a suspicion. I suspect that members who have unresolved issues about Christianity may find it challenging to engage with our Philippine partner congregation. I suspect that members who have unresolved issues about Christianity may unintentionally inhibit this congregation from growing. I suspect that it may be possible to “include and transcend” the religious upbringing of our earlier days (and, for that matter, to include and transcend the non-religious upbringing of our earlier days) in order to connect more deeply and authentically with others here and with others halfway around the world.

All of this matters. Returning to the imagery in the poem by the Rev. Lynn Ungar, whenever we are waiting in the dark, we want to know if Life is company or caller – a *caller*, as in the friend we trust to seek us, or *company*, as in the waiting spark. Every time we light the chalice flame, may we find the

spark within. Every time we light the chalice flame, may we trust others to seek us, and may we seek others. May it be so!