

Canon Jim's Window

Rev. Art Lester

Sermon at UUFJ on March 17, 2013

We've just been treated to a rare sight. You know the one I mean. A hundred old men in red robes getting ready to send up a puff of white smoke. If you think of this as a momentous occasion, I won't blame you. If you think of it as a kind of clown show, I won't twitch an eyebrow, either. But if you think it has very much to do with the truth, God and the universe and all that, I'll have to exercise a bit of tolerance and just bite my lip.

I got into a bit of trouble back in the UK recently. Despite my good intentions to just tend my little garden of liberal flowers and coast into a quiet retirement, my big mouth has got in my way again.

One day I got a telephone call from a reporter on the Croydon Guardian newspaper. He was contacting me because he knew that we work actively with the Croydon Area Gay Society. We held a public debate about same-sex marriage at our church. He said he was doing a survey of churches in town about the upcoming legislation enabling gay and lesbian couples to marry. He quoted a Roman Catholic priest, a guy who teaches religious education in six local schools and has a big church in Purley. This priest, called a canon, had recently said that the whole issue of gay marriage was "unwelcome" and contradicted the teachings of the Bible. The new guy, by the way, has called same-sex marriage "an attack on God's plan."

You can imagine my reaction to that: I scoffed. We Unitarians have been scoffing at bullying nonsense for a few centuries now. What I might forget is that it is important to be as polite as possible, probably, while being sure not to lose the energy of the scoff.

The following weekend's paper quoted me as saying that the priest's statement was "ignorant". I actually said that the position was one of ignorance, and that in fifty years' time we would be incredulous to hear that we had ever entertained any idea of trying to stifle any expression of love and commitment freely given. I said that such remarks as he made did more harm than good and that the church leaders who made statements like that needed to have their knuckles rapped from time to time.

Ministers in the UK have got a little chat room. Really just a closed email group, where we ask and give advice, spread pernicious gossip, lament the passing of the good old days, and keep ourselves amused. I don't use it much, but I did send in a link to the Croydon Advertiser article to my colleagues, to hear what they had to say.

Most of the responses were favourable, but some of them said that they thought that I should be more "temperate" in my choice of words. I always thought "temperate" was about

not drinking alcohol, but never mind. Presumably, this is because in lots of places our ministers are trying to get some sort of limited acceptance from the local councils of Christian churches. This means they are extremely loath to cause any form of consternation or offence, no matter how mild and no matter how deserving.

I can understand their points of view. Because of what I view as an overly obsessive concern for numbers of pew sitters, one of our favoured recruitment techniques seems to be to make oneself as mild and agreeable as everyone else, as if to say, “Really, we’re just like all those other churches; we just have modernised hymns and one less creed to memorise.” This ploy is doomed on two counts. One, the other churches are emptying out as rapidly as ours are—maybe even faster. And two: unless there is something striking and unusual about a church, something that makes the people who would rather loll about with the papers on a Sunday morning get up and go to a service, we are out of options anyway.

We Unitarians were once very unpopular with the church establishment. Yes, even more than we are now. We were called Unitarians as a form of mockery, just as Quakers were called by that name instead of the Society of Friends. We were famously called “a feather bed for the fallen” by a well-known Anglican priest. Even more, we were forced to build our churches five miles from a town’s market cross, or to stash them in yards invisible from the street. And sometimes we got jailed or even burnt at the stake. And you know what? Our pews were filled. They were filled with thinking people, people for whom the prevailing logic of society wasn’t convincing. I suppose “temperate language” was less of an issue back in those days.

This isn’t really an issue about gay rights, you know. As Elton John said in a recent Guardian article, this is about human rights. It doesn’t matter whether you like or dislike gay people, or whether you approve or disapprove of what gay people do. It doesn’t even matter if you think gay marriage should NOT be legalised; that’s a matter of your own conscience and due to your own tastes and upbringing. Some gay couples actually agree. It would be next to impossible to try to convince you one way or the other. But what I would try to do is invoke the sense of fairness and respect for critical thinking that makes us UUs in the first place. Something that I think that priest in Purley doesn’t know a lot about.

I’ll try a little experiment. I’m going to quote Ben Summerskill, who is the director of the UK gay rights organisation, Stonewall. This quote appeared in all the papers at the time RC Scottish Cardinal O’Brien was making a huge fuss about the proposed marriage legalisation, decrying it as “un-Christian”, etc. You may have read that he was recently forced to resign after admitting he had abused his office by having gay sex with subordinates. Summerskill said, “If the Cardinal has a problem with same-sex marriage, he should probably avoid marrying someone of the same sex.” Now I’ll just check: If you think that’s amusing, and even telling about certain attitudes, I’m delighted. I doubt very much that the priest in Purley would chuckle, or even get the point.

But I don’t hate or even dislike those guys in the funny hats, who believe they hold the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven. As a religious guy myself, I do understand that if my

conception of the Holy were mocked, I might well get upset. The problem is that for the devout believer, boundaries are set very far from their own concerns. They feel that it is their job to make everyone see the truth of their position. When that is frustrated, they get angry. They can make bigoted remarks, conspire in oppressive legislation, even start the odd Inquisition, as we know from history.

When the fervour to preserve a certain version of religious truth gets out of hand, it can make others suffer. When the Catholic Church in Ireland is able for many years to prohibit the sales of contraceptives, they cause needless suffering, and even death from the resort of ordinary people to makeshift abortions. When the Pope forbids birth control in funds sent to Africa, an epidemic of AIDS results. That's the time to forget about mild ecumenical wishes and shove a monkey wrench into the machinery. And that's where our famous tolerance finds its natural limit.

I had a chance to think this all over one morning when I was in a taxi. Where else? The driver is a kind of amateur philosopher. He had actually seen the newspaper article and was keen to talk to me about it. He's full of ideas that come from a range of sources, including philosophical tomes and – I'm not kidding--Chinese fortune cookies. He's also a proud atheist, as he spends much time reminding me. I don't mind; hey--I'm tolerant. Besides, almost half of my members call themselves atheists, too.

He began ranting about the foolish churchmen that wave the Bible at everyone, even though hardly anybody is paying attention. He was so harsh in his judgements that I was amazed to find myself inching toward the position of the cardinals and their protestant counterparts. I told him that each of these guys who now find themselves on a shrinking ice floe of old-fashioned dogma got there the hard way, through having a powerful vision of the truth. When some old boy in a brocaded robe jabs his finger at the sinful world, he is trying to protect the very thing that gives his life meaning. He may be wrong, he may even be stupid, but he is inwardly heroic.

Later I thought about what I should have said to the taxi driver. I missed my chance, so I'll tell you instead.

Once upon a time, say, you looked out a window and saw something so beautiful and so utterly life-changing that it made you devote your entire life to it. Jesus passing by, maybe. This vision just had to be shared, so you found yourself in the company of those who happened to have been looking out the same window at the same time.

You went back and kept peeking out the window, but then you started to get it wrong. You decorated the window with as much lovely material as you were capable of. You gilded the frame and surrounded it with murals. Then you placed panes of stained glass in the opening, with marvellous figures, depicting the scene as you saw it. The window became the centre of a movement, then a group, finally an organisation. All your attention was directed toward this window and its wonderful, elaborate message.

That's why you weren't able to see through the glass the next time something wonderful and life-changing passed by again.

As much as I think I'd like to dismiss Canon Jim as a mere bigot and fool, I'm afraid I can't. You see, he's being heroic. He's defending the one and only truth as it occurred to him. Guys like him wound up being burnt at the stake, too. I sometimes wonder what would happen if I got trapped in an elevator with someone like Father Jim. When they came to rescue us, hours later, would we be at each other's throats or in each other's arms? Could I sway him with my clever words and my charming personality, or would we then be captaining some opposing South London armies?

I know that Canon Jim is gazing lovingly at that stained glass window that keeps any revelations of recent truth from getting through. My question is: what is the best way to get that window opened again? Talk him into dismantling it with "temperate" words, or—as some people think I did—chuck a brickbat right through it?

And besides, if you think about it, hasn't Canon Jim done me a favour?

Think about this: we UUs spend some time gazing out of windows ourselves. That's probably why we're here this morning. OK, maybe it isn't Jesus or Moses we might catch a glimpse of, but that's what spiritually inclined people do—keep their eyes peeled for a glimpse of a life-changing truth.

We haven't put in the stained glass windows yet, but there are other things that can cloud our sight. The dust of empty tradition, for example. The grime of self-righteousness in matters of religion. The film of cynicism that shuts the light right out. Those are the things we need to watch out for.

We liberals need to remember this: let's be sure we don't get into making our own window glass too obscured to see through, lest we miss something wonderful and life-changing the next time it passes by.

Thank you, Canon Jim.

AMEN