

Christian and UU Views on Services for the Dead
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If I were not today's Speaker, I would have lighted a Joys and Concerns candle. I was in North Carolina last weekend caring for teen-aged granddaughters while their parents were away, and the newly-licensed 16-year-old took me with her to the Community Church of Chapel Hill Unitarian Universalist. A singer-songwriter guitarist gave a debut performance of his song made up of words UUs hear every Sunday – "Whoever you are, Where ever you may be," and other phrases, with the repeated refrain, "You are welcome here." We are not a liturgical denomination, but we do have words that bring comfort in their familiarity.

I got into the subject of Christian and UU views when, last fall, Donald Trump again raised the issue of Obama as a Muslim, and, by implication, non-Christian. A day or two later the *Washington Post* had a front-page, above-the-fold article asserting, and headlined, that President Obama was a Christian. Which brought me to thinking about differences between Christianity and Unitarian Universalism.

I offer as a statement of Christianity the words of a respected local personage, who describes himself as a conservative Baptist minister. Reverend John Farmer, pastor of the Irvington Baptist Church, has a weekly column in the *Rappahannock Record*. He wrote in January, "Heaven is the ultimate destination of Christians . . . Our souls will

already have left our bodies at the moment of our human death. We die in this life and are instantaneously in the presence of God.”

Going to heaven is integral to Christianity. There may not be agreement about whether heaven is being in the presence of God or God and Jesus. Or whether heaven is being in the presence of the saints. Or whether heaven is being in the presence of family and friends.

Or, as evoked by Madam Precious Ramotswe in the Alexander McCall Smith’s No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency series set in Botswana.

Remembering her late father, who had been a cattleman, Madam Ramotswe thought, “He was now in that other Botswana, the one beyond this Botswana, where there were herds of slow-moving white cattle and where all the late people of Botswana were together once more.”

While the specifics of an after-life differ, heaven is very much part of popular culture. We talk about “heaven on earth” and say “Heavens to Betsy.” Heaven is a frequent theme in what used to be called the funny papers. Every week the newspaper comics have a couple of strips with St. Peter’s gates or angels – recently, two angels playing Ultimate Frisbee with a halo. Angels are part of our everyday vernacular – We talk about our “better angels,” and, regarding the topic I have chosen for today, “Christian and UU Views on Death,” one might say, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” Consequently I have narrowed my topic to Christian and UU Views on Services for the Dead.

Because my late husband's end-of-life period was lengthy, I had a long time to think about death, and to consider an appropriate service marking Peter's death. American Unitarians of 200 years ago rejected belief in the Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. But there is not a lot of guidance on what UUs believe about an after-life. One Unitarian Internet site says, "Many of us live with the assumption that life does not continue after death, and many of us hold it as an open question." Peter and I became Unitarians in 1963, and, over time, I have become reconciled to "No after-life and no heaven." And to its corollary, "This is it. This life is all we have."

Early Christianity developed around a belief that, after death, the soul goes either to the eternal bliss of heaven or to the torments of damnation and hell. This belief was later refined to include the intermediate stage of purgatory, a holding place until God made His final disposition. Medieval Christianity added the concept that the living had an active part in directing the fate of the dead to either heaven or damnation, or through the purchase of masses and indulgences, cutting short a soul's time in purgatory – mentioned as seven centuries in something I read.

By the 1500s, indulgences had become more and more expensive, and there was more and more pressure to purchase, in what was essentially a fundraiser to refurbish St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Rome was far far away from Northern Germany, where, in 1517, Martin Luther's "95

Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” took particular aim at the practices of indulgences and veneration of relics. Luther said that freedom from God’s punishment could not be purchased with money. Luther’s “95 Theses” led to the Western Church’s split between Catholics and Protestants.

Death and after-life issues were central to many aspects of the Reformation. An early Reformation belief that the living can’t do anything about the fate of the dead brought a variety of responses. Lutheran cities moved cemeteries to new sites outside the city walls in a separation of the living from the dead. Burials were with held without ceremony or clergy, and often at night. In Geneva, John Calvin insisted on an unmarked grave.

New England Puritans, for a time, excluded clergy altogether from burials. As an example from my “Religion at the Isles of Shoals” research, Reverend John Tucke, preacher at the Shoals for 41 years until his death 250 years after Martin Luther’s “95 Theses,” kept Church Records that carefully listed the names of persons joining the church, the couples that he married, and the 700 babies that he baptized, but he left no record of deaths in the village, nothing suggesting that that he had been part of a service for a dead person.

Martin Luther, himself, was not part of the simple funeral services movement. Martin Luther adapted the Catholic mass, translating most of the mass into German and adding hymns sung in German by the

congregation. Thus Martin Luther's adaptation of the Catholic funeral mass, called the Requiem Mass, became the Lutheran funeral service, and in translation, the funeral service in England's 1552 Book of Common Prayer. Central to a liturgical service is a scripted series of spoken or chanted statements by the presiding clergy with unison responses by the congregation. Even today, a traditional liturgical funeral service is personalized only to the extent of an occasional insertion of the name of the deceased.

For Protestants other than Lutherans and Anglicans, funeral services retained some liturgical elements, but came to focus on the sermon. Sometimes the clergy's talk is a homily, an exposition of a Biblical text. More than once I've attended a service built around the Biblical text, "In my Father's house there are many mansions," usually by a clergy who did not know the deceased. And sometimes the clergy's talk is an expanded message of Christian belief.

The *Washington Post* description of Justice Scalia's funeral noted that, despite its soaring organ music, incense and more than 100 priests in white robes, the Catholic funeral was what the *Post* called "a preaching occasion," with a message directed not just to the faithful but also to those who don't usually go to church and thus never hear a sermon. Justice Scalia's funeral sermon placed emphasis on the Christian promise of resurrection and the sinner's need for God's grace.

Protestants came to wish that the funeral services be more specifically about the deceased, and modern funerals often include a eulogy. Scalia, himself, disparaged eulogies, saying flowery eulogies miss the religious significance of funerals and “Even when the deceased was an admirable person, praise for his virtues can cause us to forget that we are praying for God’s mercy to a sinner.”

Thus we have liturgical funeral services, funeral services with a sermon, and funeral services with a eulogy. I came across another category, Humanist funerals, which Wikipedia calls “non-religious funerals,” for those who recognize no after-life but want to celebrate the life of a person who has died. That sounds like a Unitarian Universalist service, although some of us dispute the “non-religious” part. Wikipedia says Humanist funerals are legal in the UK. I’m appreciative of the separation of church and state in America, with no need to determine the “legality” of a UU service for the dead.

From the songs and readings designated for Memorials and Funerals in *Singing the Living Tradition*, our 1993 Unitarian hymnal, we get a sense of an appropriate Unitarian Universalist service. Our hymnal has only two songs labeled for use at Memorials and Funerals, and we’ve just sung both of them.

The first, “Part in Peace,” speaks of “The worship and the praising,” inferring a service that is comforting to those in attendance. The second song, “Let Hope and Sorrow Now Unite,” ends with the line, “Yet

knowledge grows with joyful gains and finds out wonders far more strange than hopes of resurrection.” I take that as a “There is no heaven” statement.

Actually, the Topical Index of Hymns lists eight songs under Memorials and Funerals, six of which are scattered throughout the book. Looking ahead, our last hymn will be “Abide With Me.” It was written as a Christian hymn, with a last line not in our hymnal, “In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.” We will sing “Abide With Me” in the sense of holding in our hearts the memory of the deceased.

There are five Responsive Readings for Memorials and Funerals in our hymnal, and common to them is a theme of remembering. The last three readings are titled, “We Remember Them,” “They Are With Us Still,” and “I Think Continually of Those.” This morning’s reading was by George Eliot, written 150 years ago, and I’ll remind you that the River Readers read George Elliot’s *Middlemarch* last fall as our Big Book. As one commentary on this poem said, “Whether you believe in any sort of afterlife or not, to live on ‘in minds made better by [your] presence ... in pulses stirred to generosity’ is perhaps the best kind of immortality.”

In our previous Unitarian hymnal, *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*, published in 1964, there are ten hymns grouped together under the nebulous phrase, “Transience and Ongoing Life.” These do not include either of the songs we’ve already sung, but do include “Abide With Me.”

Among these 1964 hymns specifically for funerals is one that I love and that was sung at a recent RW-C memorial service. “For All the Saints,” with music by Ralph Vaughn Williams, speaks to an afterlife among the saints and includes a marvelous repeated chorus of Allelulias. This is actually in our hymnal, and we sing it from time to time, but it’s not on the “Funerals and Memorial Services” list.

Another song also has intimations of an afterlife. “Away O Soul,” based on a poem by Walt Whitman with music by Ralph Vaughn Williams, begins with these lines:

“Away, O Soul, hoist up the anchor now
Cut hawsers, haul out, shake out every sail
Sail forth, steer only for the deeper parts.”

I decided that Peter’s service would be one of memories by family and friends, and in contacting people on our Phone at Death list, I said that it would be a “Telling Stories” service, in part so our Christian friends would know what to expect. And so a “Telling Stories” service it was.

Song-wise, none of the hymnbook songs seemed right, and I asked my singing daughter to choose something from all the songs she knew. I winced at the non-traditional choice – “This Land is Your Land” – but it was appropriate in the sense of celebrating our family’s cross-country auto trips, Peter’s 35 years of backpacking weekends with Boy Scouts and hiking friends, and his love of the out-of-doors. “This Land is Your Land,” is easy to sing and it satisfyingly filled our UUFR sanctuary with

soaring song. It was a good finale to a service of good memories of Peter.

Our final hymn, "Abide With Me," has this quality of filling our sanctuary with song. Now let us sing hymn number 101.

Closing Circle words:

I wish all of you
a good life, a good death,
and a good Memorial Service