

Here Comes the Pope!

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Today Jews around the world mark the high holy days, the Ten Days of Repentance starting with Rosh Hashanah and ending with Yom Kippur. As Unitarian Universalists, we respect and honor this Jewish religious tradition. Often this time of year I give a sermon on the Yom Kipper theme of making amends.

However, this week a big event in the religious life of the United States is the visit of the Pope to the United States. The Pope is in Cuba today and soon he will be speaking in Washington, New York and Philadelphia. Because there are so many Roman Catholics in our country, this morning I want to reflect on this visit.

Many jokes involve the Pope. For example, the Pope is in a helicopter, flying with a student reporter, and Donald Trump. The Pope has agreed to give interviews to both of them while he flies to his next appearance. Suddenly something goes wrong in the helicopter and it starts to fall. Three parachutes are in the helicopter. The pilot grabs a parachute and jumps out of the helicopter. The Pope, the student reporter and Donald Trump look at each other. Trump screams, "I am too important to die!" as he grabs a parachute and jumps.

Pope Francis turns to the student and says, "I have lived a full life. You are young. Take the parachute."

"It's OK," the young journalist says to the Pope. "We can both jump. Donald Trump grabbed my backpack."

Twenty-one percent of adult Unitarian Universalists were raised in a Roman Catholic background. Nevertheless, our movement has a history of hostility toward the Roman Catholic Church. It was our publishing house, Beacon Press that for years published the writings of an outspoken critic of Catholicism, Paul Blanshard. In 1949, Blanshard compared Catholicism with Communism, saying that "The two are, alas, alike as the two poles of the earth. . . . They represent the same intellectual climate of authoritarian rule over the human mind."

Although times have changed, some Unitarian Universalists are still critical of Roman Catholics. One New England Unitarian congregation voted not to light a chalice during its worship service, because, they said, Roman Catholics light votive candles. They did not want to be identified with Catholics. A Unitarian Universalist minister in the Midwest criticized a colleague's worship service by saying that it was "papist." I have never seen our worship attacked because it was too much like a Buddhist service or too much like a Jewish service. However, if our service of worship is too much like a Roman Catholic service, some of us feel uncomfortable.

The cost of a papal visit also raises complaints from us. Overtime for extra police patrols will be millions of dollars and the Catholic Church will not pay for all of it. None of the cities or agencies involved has given specific estimates for how much it will cost. A visit in 1995 by John

Paul II cost taxpayers approximately \$1 million a day (equal to perhaps \$1.5 million today). After a previous visit to the United States, a Unitarian Universalist minister wrote that he was delighted that the city had seen fit to spend millions of dollars on the visit of the head of the Catholic Church. The President of the Unitarian Universalist Association would be soon coming to town. He looked forward to the city spending an equal amount of money on that visit. The reply was that an equal amount of money would be spent when Unitarian Universalists grew to a membership of sixty-nine million Americans.

Of course, this Pope is different. In the words of James Carroll he is “the culmination of a slow, if jerky, recovery on the part of the Church from its self-defeating rejection of modernity.” In the 1970s in Berkeley, a priest said to me that the church will change from the bottom up. First the people. Then the local parish priests. Then the Bishops. And finally the Pope. Forty years later this prediction appears to be coming true. Francis is a step in the uneven progression of Catholicism as it leaves behind the middle ages and enters the 21st century.

He was born in Argentina in 1936, the eldest of five children. His father was an Italian accountant and his mother worked at home. His father left Italy for Argentina in 1929, to escape the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini.

As a young man in the 1950s the future Pope worked as a bar bouncer and as a janitor sweeping floors. Regarding his life's calling, he said, “When I was young I would occasionally think about becoming a priest, but that was like how as children, you think about being an engineer, a doctor, a musician – you see someone doing that profession, and you consider it.”

The Pope describes his decision to become a priest as emotional rather than rational.

"It was September 21 – I always remember this – I went out for a walk with some friends and I passed a church. I went inside the church, I entered, I felt that I had to enter, there are things that you feel inside and you don't really know what they are. I looked and it was dark, a September morning, and I saw a priest coming. I didn't know him, he wasn't from that church, and then he sat down in the last confessional, on the left, facing the altar, and then I don't know what happened to me. I felt like somebody grabbed me from inside and took me to the confessional. I'm not sure what happened there, clearly I must have confessed, but I don't know what happened, and when I finished confessing, I asked the priest where he was from, because I didn't know him. He said ‘I'm from an Argentine city near the border with Paraguay, and I am living near here, in the rectory, and I am going to lead mass here occasionally.’"

The Pope recalled that the priest was suffering from leukemia, and died the following year. He said, "While I was there I felt that I had to become a priest, and I didn't doubt it."

He graduated college with a chemical technician's diploma and went to work in the foods section of a laboratory. But, after a short time as a chemist, the future Pope entered seminary in 1958. He was twenty-two. The Church ordained him as a Jesuit priest in 1969, when he was thirty-two

years old. A rising star, only five years later the officials appointed him head of the Jesuits in Argentina.

It was not an easy time or place to be a religious leader. From roughly 1974 to 1983 the Argentine Military Government using security forces and right-wing death squads hunted down and killed anyone believed to be associated with socialism. At least 13,000 people disappeared. One was Pope Francis' old boss from his first job after college at the chemistry lab. In 1977, this woman, still his friend, was tortured by the Argentine security services and dropped into the sea from an aircraft while presumably still living.

Some have criticized Pope Francis, as the highest-ranking Jesuit in Argentina in the 1970s, for not speaking out against the military's abuse of power. Trying to protect the lives of the priests, the future Pope demanded political neutrality from his Jesuits, something that many of them greatly resented. Six years as a leader in the Jesuit community during a military dictatorship were hard. After the completion of his term of office, in 1980 he became the rector of the Philosophical and Theological Faculty of San Miguel.

The military dictatorship ended in 1983. Nearly ten years later, in 1992, the catholic hierarchy appointed the future pope a bishop. Part of his success as a bishop is that he set up a phone line exclusively for priests who needed to call him for support. He encouraged them to use it, day or night. He came to the aid of his priests, staying with them in crises, or keeping a bedside vigil with those who were elderly and in poor health. He also doubled the number of priests working in slums. For this good work, he was appointed a Cardinal in 2001.

Eighty percent of the people of South America are Roman Catholic and because of birth rates, the South American church is growing. Consequently, Cardinals looked for a leader from South America. The fact that Pope Francis' mother and father were Italian and that Francis spoke fluent Italian, made him an attractive choice for a church still dominated by ethnic Italians. In Argentina, he lived in a small apartment, rather than in the bishop's residence. He took public transportation and cooked his own meals. This simple lifestyle made him an attractive candidate. His fellow cardinals elected him in March 2013. He was seventy-six years old.

Today Pope Francis is in his third year leading the largest organized religion in the world. As the leader of one-billion-one-hundred million Catholics, the Pope has enormous power. In many ways this Pope continues policies I have disagreed with in the past. For example, although in responding to a question about overpopulation and the church's ban on artificial birth control, the Pope said Catholics should not feel compelled to breed "like rabbits." The church continues its prohibition against contraception, even among married couples. Because of the Pope's taboo on condoms, people are needlessly infecting themselves with AIDS. Referring to this taboo, a Chicago priest who works AIDS victims said to me that Catholic hierarchy is stuck in the middle ages.

Although the New Testament says nothing against ordaining women clergy, when women have asked Pope Francis about possibly admitting women to the ranks of the catholic clergy, he has given a firm no. In this policy, he continues an ancient practice of the Catholic Church placing men in power over women.

The Pope's position on abortion is only slightly softer than past popes. The Catechism of the Catholic Church continues to say that person who obtains an abortion incurs automatic excommunication, a penalty that only a bishop can lift. Still, Francis said Sept 1 "The forgiveness of God cannot be denied to one who has repented." He added that he has met "many women" scarred by the "agonizing and painful" decision to have an abortion. Apparently, for one year, starting in December, Priests as well as Bishops can lift the penalty of excommunication for women who confess to having had an abortion. My own view is very different. I believe that for some women the decision to have an abortion is the most appropriate choice she can make. No guilt should be involved, because no sin has been committed.

So on the one hand, when it comes to contraception, women clergy, and abortion, I continue to disagree with the Catholic Church. On the other hand, in many ways the Pope is changing the Catholic Church in ways that I find exciting.

For example, earlier this month, he eliminated some of the bureaucracy and cost of obtaining an annulment. In the past Catholic Church, leaders have excommunicated divorced couples. Francis has called for the church to embrace Catholics who have divorced and remarried, saying that such couples "are not excommunicated, and they absolutely must not be treated that way!"

In the past Catholic Church, leaders have condemned homosexual activity as a sin and said that gay marriage is a threat to global peace. Francis has said "If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" Although he has vehemently opposed same-sex marriages, he has hinted that he may be open to civil unions.

For the past one thousand years, Popes have not allowed Catholic Priests to marry. In private conversations, the Pope says he intends to overturn this ban on Catholic priests from getting married. Apparently, he understands that a celibate life is not necessary to serve as priest. He thinks God made everyone to live in family, including priests.

I think these are all good and exciting changes. However, the Pope's June 18 letter on climate change makes me very happy about his religious leadership.

Francis' extraordinary statement explains how humans are causing global warming. It refers to the science that shows that greenhouse gases from fossil fuels cause climate change. The encyclical concedes that factors such as solar cycles may also play a role, but the document pins most global warming on human activity. The Pope has based his comments on accurate science as well as on his faith. He says that the sea-level rise and droughts associated with climate change will inflict the greatest suffering on the world's poorest, while the world's rich enjoy a comfortable lifestyle supported largely by fossil fuels.

He intends this letter to influence the thinking and behavior of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics. My hope is that it will influence the United States Congress where 30 percent of the members say that they are Roman Catholics. I also hope it will influence the United Nations climate talks that will take place in Paris this December. At those talks, delegates from 200 countries hope to complete a treaty to cut pollution linked to climate change.

Never before has a pope made the environment the subject of an authoritative document meant to inspire university classes and Sunday sermons. Other religious leaders have spoken out about climate change, but Pope Francis is the leader of the largest organized religion in the world.

The encyclical condemns modern materialism, warning that the stubborn adherence by a small fraction of the world's population to "a consumerist lifestyle ... can only lead to violence and mutual destruction." Today's market-driven modern economies have devastated the planet, leaving it "an immense pile of filth."

Speaking these truths to congress and the United Nations will not make Pope Francis more popular. In the United States after the encyclical was published, the Pope's favorability rating dropped by twenty points, from 76% to 59%. Still, after living through a brutal military dictatorship in Argentina, I am confident that he can stand up to folks like the climate change deniers in our congress. When he encourages our nation to act on global warming, I will be cheering him on.

It will be crowded and chaotic in Washington, New York and Philadelphia. Federal employees have been told to treat Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday as snow days—employees are encouraged to work from their homes and not to travel into the city. In New York City, they are calling the visit a "Holy Traffic Nightmare." The Pope's visit will cause the largest street shutdown in New York City history. In Philadelphia, police are already closing streets. They expect to welcome between one and two million people who will come to see the Pope next Saturday.

People flock to see him because the Pope symbolizes a life dedicated to discovering the core of meaning, around which we can structure our time on earth. He symbolizes the desire to discover the religious, the spiritual dimensions in life. Although I am not, nor will I ever be a Roman Catholic, I respect that desire and its visible manifestation in the Pope's visit to our country. Most important, his moral stand on climate change gives me hope for our future.