

Why Do So Many Progressive Theists Stick with Reactionary Churches?

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Come Sunday is an excellent Netflix film about Black Christian minister Carlton Pearson. Pearson attended Oral Roberts University in Oklahoma. He was ordained in the Church of God in Christ and established the Higher Dimensions Evangelistic Center, which later became the Higher Dimensions Family Church.

At its peak, the interracial church had thousands in attendance. However, Pearson started thinking deeply about his faith and its implications. He was especially moved by the genocide in Rwanda and the idea that most of the victims were not the right kinds of Christians that could make it into Heaven. Many of them, he believed, had not even heard of Jesus. Yet many Christians believe that only those that are saved by Jesus can enter the Kingdom of God. Pearson, though, believed that even non-Christians can make it into Heaven, and began to preach this message from the pulpit. (He also struggled with the notion that homosexuality is a sin.)

This did not sit well with many of the church members. Many of them left – especially the White members. Roberts and many Black Christian leaders essentially charged Pearson with heresy, and his church crumbled.

How could anyone with just a modicum of basic decency and humanity not see how cruel it is to assign millions of souls to eternal torment simply for not having even heard of Jesus Christ? It is not bad enough that Africans have to suffer in this world. No, indeed. God cannot be appeased and many Christians cannot be truly happy unless non-Christians also suffer forever in the *next* world. Only then can self-righteous Christians feel especially good about themselves. Ironically, this belief is about ego stroking among Christians that believe themselves to be remarkably humble. As someone once remarked, paradoxically, “they are proud that they are not proud.”

Africans, Native Americans and others were bemused when they first encountered the arrogance of Christian missionaries. They were perplexed when told that Christianity is the only True faith. The non-Christians respected and acknowledged the Christians’ right to believe in their God. They just could not

understand why they were not due the same respect and consideration. And we are still dealing with the same arrogance of faith today.

There is the ridiculous notion that monotheism is more civilized than henotheism or polytheism. However, it is monotheism that has motivated many Muslims and Christians to go throughout the world oppressing, enslaving and killing others in the name of the One True God. Henotheism, or the belief that many gods exist, at least suggests that other believers are equally rooted in “reality.”

Admittedly, there are problems with the notion that everyone will make it into Heaven. If this is true, why even bother to be moral? And what about believers like nuns and priests that lived completely celibate lives only to get the same rewards as everyone else? Why even bother to proselytize or consider Christianity to be special?

Pearson did what seems like the only reasonable thing to do: He went on to form the All Souls Unitarian Church. Unitarian Universalists, more so than most *Christians*, tend to talk the talk and walk the walk. They seem to try to be consistently progressive and consistently humane. As Robert Green Ingersoll pointed out: “their God is a gentleman.”

This raises the question of why so many progressive theists remain in reactionary churches. Some strive to change their churches from within. Others choose to suffer in silence, harboring secret doubts and desperately wanting the sense of community that has sustained (and imprisoned) them.

Others are simply too lazy to explore other options. However, with the Internet available, it is too easy to explore other religious (or nonreligious) options. There is no reason that people should feel obligated to love a church or religion that does not love them back. Why continue to be victimized by religious bigotry thinly disguised as Christian love?

Progressive Christians should not be reluctant to give humanism a try. Many Black Christians in particular seem blissfully unaware of the damage that organized religion has done to the African continent. Was all of the pain, misery, oppression, enslavement and death really worth it? Conversely, organized humanists have

traveled the world without oppressing, enslaving and killing people. We have disrupted no cultures and smashed no idols. We come in peace and go in peace.

The bottom line is that progressive Christians should at least do more to challenge the reactionary teachings of the Bible. If they cannot transform their reactionary churches from within, they need to find new, progressive churches, as Pearson did. After all, the world would be a much better place if all religious individuals and institutions were truly and consistently progressive.