

## THOUGHTS ON RELIGION

Morning, Charlie, et als (I'm not very computer savy. I'm hoping this goes to all on the DAVFers but it looks on my computer like it's only going to you, Charlie, and if that's the case, would you please pass it on).

I'm one of those atheists Charlie referred to. Actually, I guess I'm more of an agnostic. I was raised Southern Baptist (I learned to say all the books of the Bible in Sunbeams, went to SS [my dad was superintendent of the SS for over 30 yrs], "preaching", youth choir practice, Baptist Training Union and Sunday nite "preaching" every Sunday, Royal Ambassadors and, when a teenager, adult choir practice [when we were all home, my mom & dad and my 2 bros and I all sang in the choir] on Wednesdays, revivals at least 1 week a year, sometimes twice, and study courses (intensive Bible study for all ages) once or twice a year. As an adult, I was the college-age SS teacher and a choir member at Carrboro Bap when I was in law school at Chapel Hill, a SS teacher, choir member, deacon and deacon chair, trustee and trustee chair, missions committee chair, Boy Scout master, pastor search committee chair, music minister search committee chair, and church moderator at 1st Baptist, Monroe, NC until I resigned my membership about 15 years ago and became, in the words of Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong, a member of the church alumni association. My oldest son, 52, a UNC grad, has a degree from the Southern Baptist seminary in Louisville and is in his 18th yr as one of three chaplains at the federal medical prison facility in Lexington, KY. My youngest, 48, DC '95, is a hi school ass't principal just outside Louisville and also a very committed Christian. My brother-in-law, a national merit scholar at Duke and Law Review at Vanderbilt law school, gave up his practice with the largest law firm in NE Tenn about 20 yrs ago and is a charismatic, evangelical minister in Kingsport.

And, of course, like y'all, I'm a survivor of 100's of Chapels, dozens of Vespers, Religion (or was it Bible?) 11 (OT) and 12 (NT) freshman yr and 2 semesters of religion from T-Bird Tommy Clark. All to say, I'm marinated in Christianity but am now a contented agnostic. I say agnostic because, though I don't believe in a personal god, especially the one experienced by Abraham, Issac and Jacob, or Peter, John and Paul, I do believe that the Sermon on the Mount and the other teachings attributed to Jesus provide the best guidelines to human behavior that I know anything about and that it seems virtually impossible to this non-scientific mind that the cosmos and its inhabitants could be the result of nothing but time, temperature and pressure. But who knows, certainly not me, and in my view, no other human being, living, dead or resurrected (!)! James Baldwin summed it up nicely for me in a quote from him I read recently: "Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in taboos, totems, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death which is the only fact we have."

And I'll mention another source of my agnosticism, much the same as Ghandi's, who said something like "I could easily be a christian if it weren't for the christians". 6-8 years ago, Dr James Howell wrote an op-ed in the Charlotte Observer. He's the sr minister at

Myers Park Methodist Church, housed in a magnificent stone edifice that rivals the cathedrals of Europe, and the Duke chapel, which I think he aspires to be dean of, situated at the corner of Providence and Queens Rd on some of the most valuable real estate in NC. Just behind it sits the almost equally ostentatious stone Myers Park Presbyterian, which probably boasts more DC grads than any church in NC, maybe the US. Howell wrote, and may still, a monthly religion/ethics type column. In this one, he talked about all of the sins the Christian church must admit to, such as not opposing slavery, etc, a typical white, liberal call to confession. Then he talked about how he and we should admire and be more like the Pope, who has eschewed the trappings of his office, living in a small apt and driving a small used car. I wrote a letter to the editor in response. I have a copy of it somewhere but can't put my hands right on it, but I think I remember what I said fairly well, especially the first line, something like: "Does the Rev Howell not see the hypocrisy in his statement that we should be more like the Pope while leading a congregation that..." and I said what I did above about their church facility. I then went on to mention that Charlotte has been called the "City of Steeples" for its magnificent church edifices on most every corner while a then recently released Harvard study had listed Charlotte as the #1 city in the US for difficulty in escaping from poverty. I suggested that if he really meant what he said, that he would lead his congregation to sell its property, and if they still thought they needed a "house" of worship, they could probably rent a gym or auditorium from the school system, which could use the money, and they could use the proceeds to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and heal the sick in Charlotte, and then they would really be like the Pope. And if they would do that, maybe MP Pres, MP Bap, Christ Episcopal, St Gabriels Catholic, Temple Israel, and some of its other neighbors would follow suit. Howell and I spoke briefly following my letter and he asked if I would like to come to Charlotte to continue the conversation and I told him to just let me know when, that I was retired and could come any time. I never heard from him again. I will admit that the first sentence in my letter could have been a little more tactful. Reckon I hurt his feelings? I could tell you of meetings and conversations I had with Dr. Rodney Sadler, prof and director of the Center for Social Justice and Reconciliation at the Charlotte branch of Union Presb Seminary and also the now retired president, an ordained minister, of John C Smith University, whose name I can't recall, both of whom wanted to continue our conversations but neither of whom I ever heard from again. And I don't think I said anything to hurt either of their feelings.

But, having said my peace (or is it piece, you English majors?) about religion, and if you're still listening, let me say that I think the church, and I'll only talk about the Christian church since it's all I know anything about, is in a better position to fill the void in leadership in this time of economic, social, racial, cultural, and yes, religious, crisis than any other institution in the US, probably even in certain parts of the world. Why? The best method of leadership I've ever heard about is servant leadership. Isn't that what Jesus and St Francis and Ghandi and the Pope and John Lewis exhibited? And servant/leaders need to serve. And service is practical. It has to be practiced. It can only be done in a specific time and place by a specific person and persons. So, why the church?

1) there's a church facility, usually several, in every neighborhood in the country.

- 2) those facilities include meeting spaces, large and small, kitchens and often cafeterias, nursery facilities, recreation facilities
- 3) most of those facilities are used only a few hours, usually one, sometimes two, days a week
- 4) many, if not most, churches have educated leaders/administrators, trained to lead people to do good works
- 5) many, if not most, have members, some, like us, retired, who want to see good done in the world, who want to see all people have a shot at a decent life, and who are ready, willing and able to help any way they reasonably can; all they need is inspiration to get started and support to make it happen
- 6) and many of those members, like us, have excess capital to put to good use, but most of us, frugal and practical as our Depression-era folks taught us, don't want our hard earned \$ wasted or frittered away, we want to get as much bang for our buck, unlike the inefficient government and many do-good, or bad, agencies
- 7) BUT, the main reason churches and their members should be doing everything they can to alleviate poverty, create a sustainable economy that gives everyone the chance to support themselves and their families, provide the very best circumstances for kids to reach their absolute potential, save the planet and all its inhabitants from environmental catastrophe, make healthcare a human right and not a privilege, eliminate all nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, bring about human reconciliation across all divides, and teach love, not hatred or even just tolerance, peace, not war or mutually assured destruction, in other words, to bring about (for me, metaphorically, though maybe for others, actually) the kingdom of god here on earth as it is in heaven. Isn't that the reason the church exists.

I retired after practicing law for 37 years in 2008. On one of our many visits to the kids in Ky (btw, we've just bought a house and are moving to Louisville as soon as we sell our cabin near Bakersville, NC), I was running my mouth as usual about the ills of the world and my brilliant solutions thereto, and my principal son says, "Dad, you've been talking this way for years. You're retired and have the time. Why don't you quit just talking and do something about it?" Good question. So, I get home, and get to thinking about it, and remember my minister son saying, "Dad, you've got some good ideas but you can't be the Lone Ranger. You need to get others involved if you're going to accomplish anything". Good advice. So, I'm thinking, who? I'm no longer a member of a church. I've tried but couldn't connect with the guys I've mentioned above. And then it comes to me. I'm a member of a very unique and elite group. I'm a graduate of Davidson College! So, I sit down and write a letter to my classmates from '68, just to put some thoughts on paper, never intending to try to send it. The gist of it was that we're the children of the Greatest Generation, who came through the Depression, fought WWII, and came home and built the middle class in America. And we come along, better educated than our parents (my folks grew up on cotton farms in SE Meck Co and neither had the chance to go to college), in better health and with a longer life expectancy, and with a lot more money, because our parents saved theirs and gave it to us. And what have we done to distinguish ourselves. In my telling, very little. And I encouraged us, many by then in retirement, to put our heads together and roll up our sleeves and see if we, though probably about as divided politically and in other ways as we are today, couldn't come

up with and work on solutions that we could agree on. I showed a copy of the letter to 2 classmates, both retired Presby ministers. One's response was that he'd spent his career trying to get people to do good works, often not very successfully, and that frankly, he was worn out. The other said my letter was general, what kind of things did I have in mind. So, I did a ps to the letter, suggesting 4 things: 1)my suggestion of how to get kids out of cyclical poverty (by closing the 30 million word gap [google it] by serving as surrogate grandparents-more about that if you're interested, 2)that every kid, as soon as they're capable, should have the opportunity to learn how to play a musical instrument, 3)that every kid, when they've turned 18 or graduated from high school,, should be required to complete at least 1 year, preferably 2, in compulsory public service of some kind, and 4) that we should have the right, while we're competent, to sign a document providing that should we reach the point that we no longer know who we are or have any connection with our former selves, that someone should be authorized to end our lives. I showed the letter, as amended, to another friend, not a DC grad, and he asked when I was going to send it and I told him I didn't intend to, that half my classmates probably wondered if I'd even graduated, and he asked, "Why not, what have you got to lose?" Another good question!

I think it was in January '13 that I sent Marya Howell a copy of the letter and asked if I could get my classmates addresses but the privacy rules prevented that. Our 45th was coming up that June and she suggested I get up with the reunion organizers and see if it could be a topic of conversation at the reunion. I did and they said they would bring it up to the committee and I was told alumni service would be a session topic for discussion at the reunion. I went to the session it was slated for on Friday afternoon and some recent grad in the civic engagement office talked about what students were doing in the service arena. Alumni service wasn't even mentioned. N Q&A. There was another session where classmate, fellow footballer, Trustee and later establisher of the Bryan scholarships, McKinsey & Co partner, Lowell Bryan talked about the non-profit he started and ran educating medical care workers in an African country. Just before the big dinner Saturday, Julian Prosser, who I knew but not all that well during college (he was a wrestling ATO, I a footballing Phi Gam), a retired ass't city manager in Raleigh came up to me and said, rather excitedly, that he and George Shaw (a GDI from New Jersey that I doubt I ever had a conversation with in college. George and I have become good friends, as I'll describe, the last 7 years. Every week or so, he mails me copies of The Economist articles he thinks I might be interested in. He's told me that many independents not getting a frat bid in the abhorrent blackball frat system was one of the biggest traumas in their lives. It never dawned on the unwoke me what an evil system that was) had just that afternoon gotten a copy of my letter and thought it was a great idea and could we discuss it after dinner. Following the after dinner remarks, the MC, Julian's fellow Georgian, roommate and frat bro, and 2 season basketball team member, Cecil Clifton made some announcements and Julian came up and asked if he could make one. He mentioned my letter and said that anyone interested in discussing would get together for a few minutes after dinner. 6-8 of us had a dorm type bull session for about 2 hours. George, who had retired as a strategic adviser to the Board of Raytheon Corp, had recently moved from DC to Wake Forest to become involved at the corporate level with Stop Hunger Now, now, because of a name conflict, Rise Against

Hunger, at its world headquarters in Raleigh. George and his wife had learned about its mission during a meal packaging event at their church in DC.

With George taking the organizing lead, that group and a few others began periodic phone planning sessions, with the assistance of Marya and others at DC. The following spring a questionnaire went out to all alums, asking about their service involvement in college and since, their areas of interest, and whether they would be interested in service projects would other alums. I've forgotten the size of the response, but it was larger than we had expected and very enthusiastic. The group met with and got the blessing of Carol Quillen and the initial Davidson alumni service week was in April the following year, organized around alumni chapters. That first year, in Charlotte we helped frame a Habitat house one Saturday and roofed it the next. Some spoke to middle school kids about their careers through Communities in Schools, the ex dir of which was alum, Molly Shaw, who I saw on social media has recently stepped down. We packaged some meals and helped clean up the Stop Hunger Now office in Charlotte. We did some research into what other schools were doing in alumni service under its auspices and found that Yale, under the titular leadership of Justice Sonia Sotomayor, led the way, based on the number of participants relative to its number of alums. Two years later, DavidsonServesforLife, passed Yale. We '68ers handed leadership off to younger alums two years ago.

I'm sorry I've gone on so long and I hate to leave this on, at least from my perspective, a bit of a disappointing note. Two Aprils ago, we had just moved to the mtns and I became a reading tutor in the Asheville school system, a 45 min drive, thru a great program I read about. I had been trained as an Augustine Literacy Program tutor in Charlotte, and, as the first tutor outside Meck Co, I tutored a second grader who was reading behind grade level at a school in Monroe, so this was right up my alley. As Alumni service week approached and the Asheville chapter had not organized any events, I asked the tutoring program if they would host a meet and greet and I sent an email invitation, as did the chapter president, to all alums in the Asheville area, over 100, if I recall correctly. Not 1 showed up. The year before, I did the same thing for an Augustine meet and greet which they had scheduled in Charlotte. There were 40-50 attendees, only 2 or 3 DC alums. One signed up.

Back in 2012 when I started thinking about this and wrote the letter, I thought there would be many alums, like myself, retired and looking for something meaningful to do, who might lead the way in service, I realize(d) that many, I'll say all, DC and others alums are involved in service of some kind, teaching SS or serving Meals on Wheels, or a myriad of things. I didn't know about you guys. Certainly what y'all have started and are nurturing is very important. Thinking and communicating ideas and plans is always important. Efficient and effective service requires it. I'm glad to be a peripheral member of DAVF but I guess I've said all this to say, I'm more of a doer than a thinker or planner, so this is my way of saying, godspeed, but I'm afraid I'm going to try to keep my sleeves rolled up, looking for ways to get involved in the community that allowed the police to shoot 8 bullets into Breanna Taylor. DAVF is serving a great purpose and I look forward to hearing from you. I would like your individual input into what kind of "good trouble" I'm

able to get into in Louisville. My son has suggested I start a blog, and when we get moved and I figure out how, I'll apprise y'all of it and hope to have some readers and stay in touch.

Thanks for listening, Tom Caldwell '68

ps: sent with limited editing-I hate editing-so please excuse typos and just bad grammar and syntax