

# “Take Me to Church”

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*Note that sermons are written to be spoken, and do not always follow conventional grammar, paragraph structure or timing. Minor changes may have been made to the text, for clarity.*

Before we get into this, I'd like to name that I kept things simple in the description of this week's sermon. I said that there was a catchy pop song named "Take Me to Church". But there are actually -two- catchy pop songs named "Take Me to Church". One is by Irish musician Hozier. The other is by Irish musician Sinéad O'Connor.

Why are Irish musicians singing about new visions of religion? Perhaps it has something to do with the cultural shift that led to Ireland's legalization of same-sex marriage.

I personally went away from organized religion for a long period of time. After growing up UU, I did what so many of our youth do: I went off to try other things. I made some good decisions, I made some bad decisions. I tried centering my life on physics. I tried living and working in an English pub, which is a community centered on alcohol. I tried centering my life on dance. When I realized that I was trying to turn my dance community into a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I came back into the fold.

Sinéad O'Connor walked away from church. And she was rather dramatic about it. A generation ago, on live television, on Saturday Night Live, she famously ripped up a picture of the Pope. Her career had taken off with the song "Nothing Compares 2 U". In the video, you see only her head lit up against an unlit background. Her head is shaved because her looks had been giving her too much attention. There is only one thing left in her life that matters: Her relationship. And her relationship is over.

She could have other lovers. She could have a fancy dinner. She could get a pedicure. But nothing, nothing compares to her ex. Sinéad O'Connor is trained in emotional theatre, and as she pleads to get her life back, tears stream down her cheek.

Sinéad grew up Roman Catholic in Ireland, and her church has let her down, her culture has let her down. The only thing she still has hope in is her relationship, and her relationship is over. Nothing compares to you, she cries, alone, against an unlit background. Her relationship, such as it is, is the only thing she still has faith in.

Many of us have lost faith in traditional religion. With its doctrines and its scandals, it let us down. Many of us feel disconnected from the broader culture. With its injustice and its superficiality, it's letting us down. Perhaps we come here on Sunday mornings for sanctuary, and when we're out in the world our focus is social change, not social connection.

It can feel isolating.

My friend Tanya feels disconnected from the broader culture. She's not interested in expensive belongings. She's not interested in high status. She's not interested in following traditional rules that aren't serving anyone. She's not interested in the emotional walls that go up if you spend too much time riding the subway.

She just wants to love and be loved.

She has often felt lost, not knowing where to turn. She's surrounded by broken churches and a broken society, and the only thing to do is escape. So she gets on a plane and flies to India.

She can inhale India, taste India. India has soul for her. The Himalayan mountains have soul. The people sharing their food have soul. The clothes, the colours, the cows, all have soul.

She comes back to Toronto and feels like the only way to feel spiritual is to turn inwards. Do It Yourself spirituality, with the help of Pema Chodron and Thich Nhat Hahn. She feels like western society doesn't offer a religious tradition she can turn to for wisdom and guidance.

The historian Carroll Quigley writes of young people in the 1960s dropping out of society to live lives centred on love. Anyone here meet that description?

Many people were -trying- to live lives centred on love. It turned out to be harder than they thought. Their commune fills up with arguments and drama. Their anarchist household bogs down because nobody will do the dishes.

Since they don't trust anyone over 30, they don't think to ask if anyone else has every tried living a life centred on love. When they look at the church, they don't see love, and so they flail about, trying to cook up religion from scratch.

When I first met my friend Tanya, she was making progress on her spiritual quest. She came across a meditation group that she liked. She found a personal growth course that worked for her. She found a place where she could sing on occasion. But she lacked community. She lacked fellow travellers. She lacked an integrated life.

For yet another night, she lay in bed, wondering about giving up on Toronto.

Many people have given up on living an integrated life. It's too much work to seek, connect and serve. Church doesn't work for them, and they'd rather just go out and party. They don't want a preacher in their life. They want to sing about the -son- of a preacher man.

But not Sinead O'Connor. Not anymore.

Sinead O'Connor is back, with a new song, and the song is called "Take Me to Church".

She's done with singing love songs. She wants to sing about a bigger love. She wants to imagine a church she can believe in.

The video starts just like the video for her sappy love song, "Nothing Compares 2 U". There is a close-up of her face, lit up against an unlit background. But now she's singing with determination, "I don't wanna love the way I loved before, I don't wanna love that way no more. What have I been writing love songs for? I don't want to write them anymore."

She has hair this time. Recall that she shaved her head to get less attention, and now she's ready to be seen again.

She's ready to connect.

As she begins singing the line "Take me to church", the whole set lights up. Now she's singing with a rock band. She makes a joyful leap, and throws leaves everywhere. There is a massive pink tree behind her, and an aquamarine sky.

I don't think I'm overstating things to say that she's in communion with other people, and she's in communion with nature.

A dancer leaps and twirls by the tree.

This is Sinéad O'Connor's vision of church.

She throws her arm and hand in the air and calls out, "I'm gonna sing songs of loving and forgiving, songs of eating and of drinking, songs of living, songs of calling in the night, 'cause songs are like a bolt of light, and love's the only love you should invite."

"Love's the only love you should invite."

I'm not clear on what she's articulating here, but it's clear that she's having a divine experience.

The pink tree behind her is now lit up like a tree-shaped halo.

Years ago, organized religion died to Sinéad O'Connor, and now it's back, in a new and surprising way. She kicked love out the back door, and it crawled back in through the bathroom window.

In this video, Sinéad O'Connor takes us to church.

In an interview about the song, she says that she doesn't care what you call it. She believes in the Holy Spirit, but doesn't care if you call it spirit, or Fred, or Daisy.

What matters to her is that the divine is available to everyone.

Many people in Toronto are experiencing the divine. Some enormous percentage of the population see themselves as "spiritual but not religious". They get spiritual by joining

yoga classes or meditation groups. Every Friday night, 100+ people of all ages gather to dance their spirit at an event called The Move. The music starts slow, as people tune into their bodies, and then picks up, as people dance out the feelings that have been moving in them all week.

If you hang out afterwards, you'll soon learn that they're interested in much more than spirituality. Conversation might turn towards healthy eating, or environmental protection, or the social justice projects that people are engaged in. I don't care if you call it church, or sangha, or just a Friday night ecstatic dance, many people there are seeking, connecting and serving.

I call that a religious experience.

Now what about the general population? What about people who identify as neither spiritual nor religious? When they turn on the radio, they hear sappy love songs. When they go to the shopping mall, they hear sappy love songs. But sometimes a song will come on that reveals the spiritual nature inside everyone.

For many people, it's Leonard Cohen's song Hallelujah. That song can stay with you all day. While waking up, hallelujah. While doing the dishes, hallelujah. While sitting in the park, while walking in the ravines, while waiting for the subway, hallelujah.

In her song "Take Me to Church", Sinéad O'Connor proclaims that she's going to sing songs of loving, songs of forgiving. Looking at our monthly themes for this coming year, we might add, songs of promise, songs of grace, songs of integrity, songs of wonder, resilience, reconciliation, renewal and revelation. Songs of tradition, songs of revelry.

People across the GTA will eat up songs like this.

They may have walked away from religion, they may not want to hear the word religion, but they can't help but turn towards the divine.

Spirituality is being reborn in new and surprising ways. Many people have walked away from religion, leaving it to die. But many religions teach that out of death comes new life. Buddhism teaches that out of the mud grows a beautiful lotus flower. Our youth and young adults often sing that we are rising up like a phoenix from the fire. Let a thousand flowers bloom, a thousand points of light. Toronto is rising up like a phoenix from the fire.

At the Centre for Social Innovation, dozens if not hundreds of people are developing nonprofits to serve the larger world. The place is so spiritually alive that the Canadian Unitarian Council has moved its headquarters there. If you look online for spiritual directors or spiritual classes, you'll find offerings throughout Toronto. If you look on your local bulletin board for social justice actions, you'll wear out the soles of your shoes before you can say yes to all of them. If you walk along Yonge St. or Queen St. or College St., stores are popping up helping people connect with religious traditions from around the world. Walking down Yonge St. -can- feel like a religious experience. It is for the people at the Yonge Street Mission.

Those who are leading our social justice work know that we have allies throughout Toronto. And when we step up and respond to global emergencies, we have allies throughout Toronto. Take me to Amnesty International. Take me to Syria. Take me to Honduras. Take me to Haiti. Take me to Fukushima. Take me to Katrina. Take me to Idle No More. Take me to refugees here, refugees everywhere.

Take me to New Visions. Take me to the voting booth. Take me to the homeless shelter. Take me to the food bank. Take me out of the cold.

There's so much going on in Toronto. Take me to Caribana. Take me to Pride. Take me to Queen's Park, Regent Park, Thorncliffe Park, Dufferin Grove Park.

Now, about my friend Tanya, who used to believe that she had to leave Toronto to find spiritual connection. She doesn't use the word church, but you could ask her, "Where would you take me, if I asked you to take me to church?"

She might take you all over Toronto, to a yoga session, or a meditation group, or a psychotherapy program. And you'd notice that wherever she goes, she hopes that the group will turn into a community.

She welcomes food into the mix, she welcomes song, she welcomes check-ins, she welcomes social justice outreach.

I hope that one day she realizes that she's trying to turn each of her communities into a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and she decides to join us here.

There are 2 catchy pop songs out there called "Take Me to Church". They're an opportunity to ask the people in your life, "Where would you take me, if I asked you to take me to church?"

Toronto is thriving with answers to that question.

All across Toronto, people are seeking, connecting and serving. We can use that question to deepen our relationships, to become deeply networked with Toronto's interdependent web of love and justice.

And we can ask people to join us, to find out why we choose to seek, connect and serve, right here at First.

## **Closing Words**

In Toronto, you can take me to church. Take me to temple. Take me to synagogue. Take me to mosque. Take me to sangha. Take me to circle. Take me to fire. Take me to spirit. Take me to love. Take me to justice. Take me to community. Take me to diversity. Take me to the ravines. Take me to the stars.

Take me to First.

