

Q&A Interview |
Reverend Shari Halliday-Quan
First Unitarian Church of Rochester

This interview has been edited for clarity.

Biandudi Hofer: When the news broke on June 24th that the Supreme Court had overturned Roe v. Wade, how did you address that news with your congregants? What was that like for you and them?

Halliday-Quan: When the news broke that Roe v. Wade had been overturned by the Supreme Court, of course, we had been prepared for that because of the leak, and so we had a little bit of prep, but also I and the assistant minister of this congregation, and so many others of my colleagues, were across the country at a convention, a conference together, knowing there's a congregation here of hundreds of people reeling from this news.

And there's a seminarian in our congregation who is an incredibly faithful, active person who very quickly texted me. I was recording a video to share with my congregation, a video message from the pastor, from the minister, because I knew that that was going to trigger a lot of grief, a lot of fear, a lot of anger, and, for some people, shock, and for other people, just an affirmation of the worst news that they knew was coming, as well as the mixed emotions. I don't think that everyone I serve in this congregation is pro-choice or pro-voice, as we sometimes say. So, I knew there'd be a big reaction.

And this faithful seminarian texted me and said, "Hey, I would be willing to lead a grieving space tonight." Knowing, of course, both she and I know that that's not going to solve everything, that this will take action for Unitarian Universalists. Policy and legislative action and work in the world matter to us a lot. And, that night, it was most important that we had a place to process, not only alone but in community. And so, the truth of the matter is, I was a part of a congregation, the leader of a congregation, that is the work of many people. And so, I got to turn to other people here while they took the initiative to create a grieving space.

Biandudi Hofer: You mentioned, in so many words, that your congregation is not a monolith. There are lots of different viewpoints and beliefs. What, for the most part, would you say do your congregants think of the Supreme Court's decision?

Halliday-Quan: There is a lot of diversity of belief here, not only when it comes to abortion and reproductive justice but all matters of things. And, the vast majority of us, and Unitarian Universalism at large, believe that access to abortion is not only something we believe in spite of our religion but as a matter of our faith, that bodily autonomy and access to healthcare and reproductive freedom and justice is a part of what it means to be a faithful person, that we see ourselves in connection with other people. And so, even if you're one of the rare people for whom abortion is not something that personally affects you, a family member, or a friend, we do

talk about abortion as rare, but quite frankly, it impacts an immense number of people, and the vast majority of Americans know and love someone who has had an abortion. So, as an article of our faith, keeping it as safe and accessible as possible is a priority for us.

Biandudi Hofer: So the way you're describing it, and correct me if I'm wrong and if I'm mischaracterizing it, for Unitarian Universalists, abortion, the right to have an abortion, is deeply connected to your faith. This is a right and an act that you believe is genuinely connected to the core of your religion?

Halliday-Quan: Absolutely. Right. So, as a Unitarian Universalist, our emphasis is on not only personal freedom but responsibility to and for one another. We see ourselves as interdependent and interconnected with broader society. And so, what we know is, not just the right to have an abortion, but the ability to access an abortion, because those are two separate things, and yet intertwined, keeps our society safer, keeps people able to live lives of meaning and safety. So, as an article of our faith, as core to who we are, abortion is a central topic for us.

It is not a standalone issue that, for us, is not connected with other ways of living in the world. So what I mean by that is, from small children from age five up until older adults, we have a sexuality education program, that when we're talking about it with kids, what we're talking about is, how do you have conversations with people when they've hugged you too hard? It's about communication and consent and how your body has a right to be safe, and it means not imposing your body on other people.

And obviously, that gets more explicit and tackles different topics when you're a high school student. It gets more explicit and tackles different topics when you're an elderly person whose body is very different from when you were young. So we're connecting it to a journey of spirituality that says your spirit doesn't just belong in the air with God or in your mind between your ears, but that a spiritual life happens in relationship with your body and with other people.

Biandudi Hofer: That's really fascinating. It makes me think about something you shared with me during your pre-interview. You mentioned that your beliefs are very nuanced. There could be a perception from the outside when it comes to Unitarian Universalists that the church believes one particular way about abortion. But it's multi-layered and complex, is that right?

Halliday-Quan: Yeah. So, it's interesting to hear you say one could perceive, if they didn't take a deep look at Unitarian Universalism, that we're all about abortion, or that we're all about queer and trans kids and protecting them, or that we're all about protecting voting rights, or we're all about meditation. Depending on what window you look into, you could think that's the only thing. You might also say, "Hey, here's a place you can come, and you can believe anything you want," and there's nothing in common. And I don't think either of those things is true.

There's an incredible amount of nuance in that, in our congregations, people do believe different things. Nobody believes the same exact thing that the next person in the pew believes also. And quite frankly, that's also true in other religions. I don't know two Catholics who believe all the

same things. And we're held together by a common sense and ethical commitment that we are connected to one another. And so, what happens in wider society and to my siblings matters to me. Our liberation is bound up with the liberation of others.

Biandudi Hofer: What would you say is oversimplified about this issue? And when I say this issue, I mean the issue of abortion in our country.

Halliday-Quan: I think the language of pro-life and pro-choice is deeply unhelpful. Pitting personal freedom against the idea that life is precious, which of course it is, is actually not being fair to either side of the argument. I think pro-lifers are appropriately criticized for perhaps not holding care for people over the course of a lifespan. And that's a common argument that I probably don't need to make here, but I believe very deeply that if you are advocating for what you believe is a right to life, that means also a right to care and support for a life that involves thriving.

When it comes to pro-choice, this idea that personal freedom is the most important thing lacks nuance also. I and Unitarian Universalism believes deeply in bodily autonomy. We do not believe that one person's body should be forced to do something for the benefit of another person. We have other instances of that in American history, and it feels like a dramatic language to use when we talk about forced labor. But that is exactly what we are talking about. And, when we cast forced pregnancy onto other circumstances, I think the wider conversation can hold more nuance.

So, for example, in broader society, we don't generally believe that people should be forced to donate an organ. And in fact, our courts have clearly affirmed that a father cannot be forced to donate an organ or blood to the life of their child to save the life of their child. And yet, the very real risks, both in terms of health and livelihood, that pregnant people have to take on, we hold far too lightly. So, that's a long answer, but I think our language is oversimplified and doesn't do justice to either side.

Biandudi Hofer: I'm curious, what do you think those who disagree with you think of you and your beliefs?

Halliday-Quan: I assume that those with a different or opposing view think of me as someone who is faithless, religionless, secular, cold-hearted, selfish. And I don't know that that's true. I'm sure there are many people who are able to view me with nuance. And quite frankly, it is a challenging place to be in conversation with people when people's faith says, "My religion demands that other people are not able to access abortion," because my faith, my religion demands that access to abortion is a right that I need to protect and continue to place in a continuum of care for my siblings. So, it's a challenging conversation, no matter how we slice it.

Biandudi Hofer: What do you wish people with opposing beliefs understood about you?

Halliday-Quan: One of the things I left out about how I assume others view me and others like me is potentially that we're elitist or out of touch. And the experience that I have had sitting with people who are about to have an abortion, will have an abortion, or the conversations that I've had with people who politically or socially oppose abortion, and yet talk about their own experiences with their own sisters or families or girlfriends, I wish that people on the other side of the argument knew how deeply I care about people, how much I strive to live my faith, and how much nuance I strive to bring into this conversation. I wish they knew how much respect I had for them, and I do believe most people are trying to do the right thing. So, I wish they knew that about me. And, what I'd hope for them is that they would spend some time with a wider group of people to see the impact of these policy choices.

Biandudi Hofer: Reverend Shari, what would you like to understand about them?

Halliday-Quan: I struggle with understanding this particular issue as the linchpin or single issue that will change people's opinions about nearly anything. It has been used really effectively as a political tool. It's shifted the landscape of American politics and religion over the last 40 years in some really extreme ways. And, I think for folks who have a really strong opinion that abortion should not be possible in this country, the ways in which that is the single guiding lens, I don't understand, and it feels difficult for me to put myself in that mindset.

Biandudi Hofer: What's the question nobody's asking and should be?

Halliday-Quan: I don't think I have any wildly unique questions. I think I pay attention to a lot of people who are a lot smarter and who have been at this work a lot longer than I have. And so, I will say that the questions that are missing from mainstream conversations are the questions I hear being raised, in particular, by Black and brown activists in the South, in particular, in places where abortion access has been extremely limited. And so then the questions around, what is the impact of forced pregnancy on communities, on individuals, on our wider society is a question that I think has to be a part of this conversation. When abortion is made more difficult to access, as it has been in the past four months?, what happens then? And who suffers?

Biandudi Hofer: Reverend Shari, what life experiences would you say have shaped your views on abortion?

Halliday-Quan: I think being someone who has had friends who have had abortions, friends who have thought about seeking abortions and ultimately decided not to. Being in the company of people who have sexual lives and who have had unexpected pregnancies. So my life experience is both really specific in that way. As I look back, and I'm not going to name who my friends are here, but what strikes me as perhaps important here is it's not special in any way. My life experiences feel immensely common, and I don't believe anyone has universal experiences. There's no one thing that describes everybody in the world, but they're very common. And it's what a lot of people have gone through.

Biandudi Hofer: Is there anything about this abortion debate that makes you torn?

Biandudi Hofer: I do think abortion is a complicated topic. And our highly politicized, highly polarized conversation that doesn't allow a ton of room for nuance means that the Unitarian Universalist long thinker in me wants to do the, "But what if?" And wants to say, "Okay, but do I actually support access to abortion in all circumstances?" If I were a part of a community and we were the last 300 people on this planet, would forced pregnancy have a social good in that context? And the answer is, I don't know. We're not in that situation now. And I can't pretend that the ethics of this moment are going to apply to every moment across all possible variations of human experience. Now, that may seem like a silly thing to say, but I think often in our arguments, we do push people to the very end to say, "Okay, but what if?" And the answer is, well, that might be a different thing. And that's okay because we're talking about a different question at that point.

So in terms of the, am I torn about the abortion conversation now? I don't think abortion's always going to be the right choice for every person in the case of an unexpected or unwanted pregnancy. And I think in faster, less nuanced conversations, that's the assumption that will be made about me. It is sometimes the right choice. I do believe that, and I want to be able to make sure that people have the ability to safely and freely access abortion if that's the right choice for them. But is it always the right choice? No. And I'm afraid in our very flat, very angry conversations that we lose that nuance of personal experience and personal counsel and the ability to be in community and make good choices for yourself and your own life. That's what tears at me.

Biandudi Hofer: Is there anything, Reverend Shari, that you would like to include that I did not ask you?

Halliday-Quan: I think it's probably worth saying, though it was obvious from everything else that I said, that this isn't a conversation around abortion versus faith. In our context, when we say progressive, we don't actually mean politically; we mean theologically. People of faith are advocating for believing deeply in and caring about abortion access and people who have abortions. This is a conversation that spans across a faith spectrum, and it brings me deep pain that so often it is other people of faith are the ones who are, from what I can tell, so deeply harming and hurting and putting at risk my beloveds.