

UUs and Christianity
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While I was in seminary and doing my internship I continued my work at the University of CA. Many of my co-workers were curious about my training for the ministry. There was one fellow in particular who stands out for me. He had been raised in a very strict Christian family but had later broken away. He felt disenfranchised from Christianity – perhaps a bit traumatized and he was having difficulty reconciling me as he knew me with me as a minister. We talked a lot about religion and faith, and he was trying to understand Unitarian Universalism.

I was encouraging him to visit the UU Church of Davis, which has a wonderful community. "How much Jesus is there?" he asked me with what I thought was a not-so-slight amount of fear and suspicion. So I said with totally cavalier confidence, "There's zero Jesus!" He said, "Really? *Zero Jesus?*" "Yes," I elaborated, "you're not going to hear a lot about Jesus at a Unitarian Universalist church."

Hmmmm. What does it mean that I can say with confidence that--with the exception of Christmas and Easter, and maybe not even Easter--you're not going to hear a lot about Jesus in UU churches? When I talk to people about our religion, I describe us as a liberal Protestant religion. I've gotten kickback from some UUs on the "Protestant" part, but if you talk to anybody who was not raised in a Christian church, they will tell you that UU churches feel very much like a Protestant church. Our structure, our rituals, our hymns, our practices are very Protestant. However I would not say that we are Christian. However "zero Jesus," is also not the right answer for in saying that we're neglecting our profound history.

Many of you know that the Unitarian side of religious ancestry actually came out of the Congregationalist movement – now the United Church of Christ – the denomination of our host church here at Sierra Arden. The Congregationalists came out of the Puritans, who themselves came out of the Church of England. The Puritans had left England because they thought the Church of England was not pure enough. To the Church of England, the Puritans were heretics. The word "heretic" comes from the Greek "to choose." It was their heretical nature that is an important part of our heritage, which said, "We don't like what the church is doing, so we're going to create our own church and do what we think will work for us." For the puritans this meant moving to America to establish the churches as they saw fit.

Unitarianism in the United States was first formed in the early 19th century, when our beliefs about Jesus and God defined us as separate from the Congregationalists and started us on this path away from Christianity. It established us as a liberal religion - following a heretical path is what liberal religion is about. When we talk about Unitarian Universalism as a liberal religion, we're saying that it is one that is evolving and changing, and that in doing so, it is trying to stay relevant. We differentiate ourselves from other traditions by our willingness to re-envision what our faith means in a radical way.

Some of the most radical re-envisioning happened in the early 19th century.

You've probably heard of the names William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Theodore Parker (who you could call the Holy Trinity of Unitarianism). Channing, a Congregational minister, got the ball rolling with a series of sermons that he gave, but one in 1819, "Unitarian Christianity," was particularly important. In it he challenged several basic Christian tenets. As a child, I had been bothered by one of those tenets, the theology of atonement, which is the idea that God sacrificed Jesus for our sins. Channing said that it is very degrading to God's character to say that God would do that – kill his own son. He spoke about how the concept of the Trinity is not in the Bible, how such a concept is offensive to any reasoning person who studies the Bible, and how Jesus is not the same as God. Significantly, he also challenged the idea that humankind is inherently depraved. In later sermons he affirmed that every human is endowed with a moral likeness to God and has the potential for growth. You can see this idea in the First Principle of Unitarian Universalism, which affirms “the worth and dignity of every person.”

It is hard not to overstate how radical Channing's sermons were at the time – and yet he was not the source of any of these ideas. People had been burned at the stake for such ideas since the early years of Christianity--for example, Michael Servetus, a Spanish theologian from our European Universalist history. But William Ellery Channing brought these forth in a very significant way, in early 19th century America. In so doing, he started a path that led to Unitarians to separate from Congregationalists and ultimately for us to diverge from our Christian roots.

Ralph Waldo Emerson carried us further along that diverging path. In his famous Divinity School address of 1838, he was bold enough to say that Jesus was a divinely inspired human, on par with other great prophets, but that he was not himself divine. He said that Jesus taught us through his life and words how to connect our soul to the greater Spirit. Emerson also incorporated ideas from other religions such as Hinduism in a way that profoundly offended many in the Christian denominations of that time. Emerson ended up stepping away from the Unitarian ministry, but not necessarily because of that particular message, even though it was very provocative at the time.

But the one who paid the greatest price for speaking out was Theodore Parker. His famous 1841 sermon, "The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity," got him drummed out of the ministry. He was shunned by his fellow ministers, some of whom secretly supported him or agreed with his position. In those days, preaching was a two-hour event every Sunday. If nobody would exchange pulpits with you, you had to write a new two-hour sermon every Sunday. Parker ultimately gave up his church and became a circuit preacher, a job that freed him from the obligation to preach every Sunday and allowed him to be an active abolitionist.

In “The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity,” Parker said that the persona of Jesus and the concept around Jesus were transient, but the message of Jesus was permanent. In the mid-1800s, people who wanted to see that in a negative light felt that Parker was telling

people, "Forget about Jesus, you don't need Jesus." For us in the 21st century, we can interpret Parker as saying, "Don't get hung up in all those beliefs about *who* Jesus was--that's transient. Instead, focus on what Jesus's *message* was--that's what is permanent about Jesus."

Channing, Emerson, and Parker got the ball rolling--but, as with any kind of cultural change, it takes a while for the ideas to filter their way through the community. But by the mid-19th century, our American Unitarian forbears were developing churches in what was then called the West (which would be the Midwest to us). There was a very radical group in the West who took liberal religion and the value of "always moving forward" very seriously. They took Parker to heart and had a message of Christianity that worked for them, but was heretical to others.

This group caused quite a bit of discord between the Eastern and Western wings of Unitarianism. This disagreement came to a head around 1865, when a group of radical attendees walked out of a national Unitarian conference because they refused to agree to having the words "the Lord Jesus Christ" in the statement of Unitarian faith. Those who were in favor of the inclusion said "Who are we if we're not Christian? If we move away from our Christian roots, we're setting the stage for our own demise." These people were worried that this radical shift might ultimately doom our denomination and deprive future generations of the great ideas of their faith.

Humanism entered the picture in the first half of the 20th century and really transformed our denomination and our congregations, particularly in what became the West of that century, the Pacific Coast. When the Unitarians and the Universalists merged in 1961 and began establishing the principles that they had in common, a lot of the Christian language in those principles officially fell away.

Unitarian Universalism is still here, so the de-emphasis of traditional Christianity that was so feared in the mid-19th century did not cause our demise. But we still have questions about our faith, here in the 21st century. What does define us? What are our roots, and where are our wings? Are we through with Christianity?

UUs may have ended their formal relationship with Christianity, but it will always be a part of our history. I would argue that we haven't quite evolved a healthy attitude toward Christianity. In a way, we're kind of like that adolescent who still has a chip on his shoulder about what his parents taught him. We're a little defensive about Christianity; we don't have an easy connection with it.

One way this manifests is our discomfort with UU who chose to engage with Christianity. "Shouldn't we be welcoming to liberal Christians in our congregation? Shouldn't we be more open to the possibility of people being 'out' about their Christian faith or the idea that Jesus is a profound teacher for them?" Our uneasiness with Christianity is interesting because there are a lot of UU Buddhists, and I think we're much more comfortable when somebody says "I'm a UU and I'm a practicing Buddhist" than when they say "I'm a UU, and I'm a Christian who follows Jesus." For many of us, there is still a lot of baggage attached to the idea of Christianity.

It's important to note that there are UU Christians in our denomination. They are present in varying numbers in many of our congregations. In fact, the largest UU congregation in the country, in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is a very Christian church. If you go online and look at their website, Jesus is present in their worship and church life.

At the time of this writing, the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship lists 62 contacts, which means there are probably around 60 Christian fellowships active in their respective UU congregations. This compares with the 1,041 congregations worldwide who belong to the Unitarian Universalist Association. So you can see that Christianity is a small but active component of our UU faith. At General Assembly, our annual meeting of UUs, there are wonderful UU Christian fellowship activities. I go every year to the communion service there, and I find it to be a meaningful expression of Christian faith that is wholly compatible with UU.

It's hard to know how many UU Christians there are. A couple of years ago I gave a series of five sermons at our sister congregation UUCC, that were inspired by the "zero Jesus" conversation. At the final service, I invited people to share what Jesus meant to them, how they related to Christianity, or how it informed their spiritual lives. I was slightly nervous that no one in the congregation of 60 members would respond to my invitation. But seven people did come forward - which is over 10 percent of the congregation. This both surprised and pleased me. It makes me wonder how many people in this congregation are inspired by the life and message of Jesus.

Now the first question that you might have for a UU Christian is, "If you want Christianity, why don't you just go to a Christian church? There are so many of them!" But you heard Stephen Kendrick in the reading say how Jesus has profound meaning for him in the context of his Unitarian Universalism.

I think it's very important for us as Unitarian Universalists to fully understand the history of Christianity in our denomination, and to appreciate more deeply how Jesus's message can be an important source of meaning for us. We need to work through some of personal difficulties with Christianity and open ourselves to the relevance of his message for our times. Many UUs are finding ways to be open to this message, and I think they can happen for more of us. Because of our history and lack of theological baggage, UU can make a contribution by reclaiming Jesus's message and, in doing so, reforming it.

As I have described our Unitarian history as it relates to Christianity it seems to have a linear shape, always pointing away. But perhaps the shape of the relationship is more of a spiral. Instead of moving farther and farther away from Christianity, maybe we're now mature enough to spiral back and re-collect some of the essential message that Jesus delivered. There is profound meaning in what Jesus has to offer, and it is important for us as UUs to gather up and honor wisdom and meaning wherever we find it.

When I consider new ways of relating to Jesus message I start to feel that it is not my right to do so because I am not a Christian. As UUs we have a right to this message because it is part of

our history. We should not feel defensive when we are faced with issues about who we are as Unitarian Universalists and what our relationship to Christianity should be.

Theodore Parker said, "We don't need Jesus to have the message of what Jesus said." But in this world, where Jesus has been so misunderstood and so much of his message has been perverted, I think we *do* need Jesus. I think we need to reclaim Jesus for who he was. He has a message that the world recognizes, it is part of our heritage, and I think we should claim it proudly. As the Rev. Kendrick said, we're only beginning to understand the radical nature of Jesus's message." Maybe it's time now in our denomination to engage with the message that already speaks to so much of the world.

I invite you to engage with what Jesus had to offer in your own way. Certainly, there are already so many resources you can use as a starting place. I invite you to relate with Jesus as a man, a prophet, not the theologians' image of Jesus, which is burdened with so much that does not belong to the historical, prophetic, and mortal Jesus.

Years ago there was a bumper sticker that said, "Jesus is coming, and boy is he pissed!" Whoever originally wrote that was probably commenting on what's happening in the world, and there's truth in it. But I also interpret that statement to mean, "Jesus is pissed about what people are saying about him!" Theodore Parker stood up and proclaimed the power of Jesus's message, as Jesus said it in his own words. William Ellery Channing proclaimed it, and so did Ralph Waldo Emerson. These men freed us from the theological bondage of the this message.

We need to honor the message of Jesus by reclaiming it, and doing so with honesty and integrity. Let's continue our proud Unitarian Universalist heritage by reclaiming this message, letting the words and deeds of this ancient prophet inspire us in a way that works for us. Let's do this as a way of enriching our Unitarian Universalist faith and strengthening it for use in the 21st century. Let us go forth this day with fresh eyes and an open heart about how the message of Jesus may have meaning for us in our lives today. So may it be.