

Jesus

Unitarian Universalism and the Son of God

By
Todd F. Eklof
December 6, 2009

Today I'm spelling Jesus with two U's to launch my discussion of Christianity's evolving, some might say, "declining," significance among Unitarian Universalists. For though our faith is rooted in Christianity, we would be sore pressed today to claim that Unitarian Universalism is still primarily a Christian religion. Although we may have those who identify more with Christianity than other religions among us—and are welcome and encouraged to do so—Christianity itself is no more central to our faith than Buddhism, Humanism, Mysticism, Paganism, Atheism, or any of the other *isms* represented among our ranks.

Today Unitarian Universalism draws inspiration equally from a variety of sources we refer to collectively as our *Living Tradition*. We embrace the worthwhile teachings of mystics, prophets, and priests from all the major world religions, as well as from noteworthy scientists, philosophers, and other great secular thinkers and reformers. We are even free to seek inspiration and understanding from some beliefs and ways that are on the fringes of the mainstream, or, in some cases, completely out there. And though we still single out Christianity as that source which calls us to "respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves," it no longer represents who we are.

But this has not always been the case. Throughout most of our history, in fact, it would have been fair to refer to ours as a Christian faith that just so happened to accept two doctrines considered false by most other Christians. It wasn't until the 19th century that Unitarians, in particular, began debating whether or not we should continue to use traditional Christian terms to discuss and describe our faith. During his now infamous lecture to the 1837 graduating class of the Harvard Divinity School, it was Ralph Waldo Emerson himself who challenged us to move beyond, to transcend, what he referred to as "cold corpse Unitarianism,"¹ by recognizing, at least in part, as he put it, that, "truth is truth, whatever its source."² So it seems fair to say it was this great transcendentalist who began the discussion that has inevitably led us to embrace so many different sources of inspiration today. Perhaps this is why Oliver Wendell Holmes later referred to the notorious Divinity School Address as, "our intellectual Declaration of Independence."³

This may be a more accurate analogy than he intended given that Emerson's speech sparked more than a revolt that is now historically referred to as the "Transcendentalist

¹ *Theological Options for Unitarian Universalists: Theism and Transcendentalism*, Sermon delivered to the First Unitarian Church by Christine Robinson (Minister), Albuquerque, New Mexico, March 10, 1996.

² Crocker, Kelly J., *Unity in Diversity: A Unitarian Perspective*, Sermon delivered to First Unitarian Society, Madison, Wisconsin, June 2, 2002.

³ *Our Transcendentalist Legacy*, by Reverends David and Beverly Bumbaugh, The Unitarian Church in Summit, NJ, October 19, 1997.

Controversy.” Many of the Unitarian clergy on Harvard’s faculty at the time were incensed and dismissed Emerson as an infidel, and it was originally those in opposition to his “new views” that first coined “transcendentalism” as a pejorative term. Nevertheless, as historian David Bumbaugh has concluded, “Whatever his intentions may have been, Emerson permanently weakened the authority of Christianity within American Unitarianism and replaced it with an intuitive and mystical quality. In one summer afternoon, Ralph Waldo Emerson transformed the nature of religious discussion.”⁴

But the controversy over what language we ought to use was not settled easily by Emerson, even after the transcendentalist controversy subsided. Not long into the start of the 20th century, three Unitarian ministers, Curtis W. Reese, John H. Dietrich, and Charles F. Potter, became humanists, and were all original signers of the *Humanist Manifesto*. Through their influence many Unitarians began to question whether we should use traditional theistic religious jargon to discuss our faith at all. If “man is the measure of all things,” as humanism purports, and the goal of religion ought to be the realization of the human personality, why need we mention “God” at all? When Reverend Reese discussed his views while presenting to the Harvard Summer School of Theology in 1920, he said, in part, “Liberalism is building a religion that would not be shaken even if the thought of God were out-grown.”⁵ His lecture started another controversy, known as the *Humanist Debate* that lasted nearly a decade before the dust settled, leaving us with a denomination today in which nearly half of its members claim to have humanist leanings.

And today, especially, the controversy over language continues. Transcendentalism freed us from the language of Christianity; Humanism liberated us from the need to use theistic language at all; with the result that today we are still trying to figure out how to talk about ourselves. Words like, *religion, church, faith, worship, denomination*, and, especially, *God*, make many Unitarian Universalists uncomfortable, and we’re all still trying to figure out how to accommodate these sensitivities while also honoring and inspiring the deists among us.

Oddly enough, this is where Jesus comes into the conversation. Unitarian Universalists, in many ways, have more trouble with Christian language than of other religions, most certainly because so many of us left Christianity after being wounded by it in some way. So it’s important to distinguish the difference between Jesus and Christ. When religious scholars speak of “Jesus” they are referring exclusively to the historical man. When speaking of Christ, on the other hand, they are referring to the mythical Christ of faith that is worshipped as God. Despite our evolving language, Unitarians, and our predecessors, have always emphasized Jesus the man and the importance of his humanitarian teachings, and largely ignored the fictional Christ of faith revered in he mainstream.

So, even though Unitarianism itself was not coined until the 16th Century, we have been debating how we ought to consider Jesus almost from the time he walked the Earth. His original followers, we all know, like himself, were Jewish. It was not unusual for them to believe he might be the Messiah prophesied about in their faith. In Judaism the

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Bumbaugh, David, E., *Unitarian Universalism, A Narrative History*, Meadville Lombard Press, Chicago, IL, 2000, p. 138.

Messiah was nothing more than an ordinary human being anointed to restore Israel to greatness. What made Jesus' original followers unique among the Jews is that they continued to believe he was the promised Messiah even after his death and obvious failure to restore Israel. But because they believed it was really his teachings about nonviolence, compassion, forgiveness, trust, and sharing that could save the kingdom, it was only necessary that they kept his spirit alive by continuing to promote and live out his teachings among themselves. They didn't need him to be physically present because, as Jesus himself is reported to have said, "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name, that's where I'll be."

Yet, for reasons I won't go into here, the Apostle Paul seized upon Jesus' growing popularity to invent his own religion, Christianity, in which he completely ignored Jesus' life and teachings, in favor of his more esoteric, Hellenistic beliefs that have become the basis of Christianity. Jesus' early Jewish followers argued against Paul's bizarre interpretation of his life, yet were eventually drowned out by the enormous number of Roman and Greek Gentiles attracted to Christianity and its elevation of Jesus from being human to divine. But in so doing they created a very difficult problem, how to worship a man as God who was himself part of a strict monotheistic religion that believed in only one God and considered it a major sin to make an idol of any earthly object, especially a human being?

Some simply continued to promote the idea that Jesus was but a man anointed to do God's work. The debate continued more than 300 years until Emperor Constantine made Christianity legal and paved the way for it to become the official Roman religion. In 325 CE, he convened the Council of Nicaea during which the Emperor himself suggested they settle the matter once and for all by using the Greek word *homoousious*, meaning, "of one essence," to define the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. The result, as many of us know, was the Nicene Creed, which states, in part, "I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible, And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made."

Before long it became illegal to espouse any other view, and those who wanted to promote the humanitarian teachings of Jesus were effectively silenced. This silence, which seems to have precipitated the Dark Ages, during which people were not free to think for themselves, nor, more importantly, to promote the life-affirming teachings of Jesus, or any other great teacher, for that matter, lasted nearly a thousand years, until the invention of the printing press made it possible for some people to begin reading the Bible for themselves. When the Spanish theology student, Michael Servetus first did so, he was stunned to learn the word "Trinity" does not exist in it, nor is there any Biblical support for such a peculiar notion. To make a long story short, Servetus was eventually burned at the stake as a heretic.

Nevertheless, the cat had been let out of the bag, and the anti-Trinitarian movement, known as Unitarianism, began. Shortly after Servetus' execution, a Polish theologian, Faustus Socinus, came to similar conclusions and began expressing the notion that salvation comes by following the teaching of Jesus, not by worshipping him. Still, at this point, it's important to remember that these early Unitarians were like Christians in every other respect. They were simply Christians who did not believe in the Trinity. They believed in only one God, yet still revered Jesus as his son, though not quite as his equal.

We can see from all of this that the recurring problem of our faith, throughout its history, has been a semantic problem. How do we talk about Jesus? What do we mean by Christ? What is religion? What is God? Ours is a faith that has continued to ask these questions for 2000 years. Today we have seven principles listed in our denominational bylaws that attempt to define our common values.

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

And guess what, these principles are still being debated today. Our Commission on Appraisal, which is charged with exhaustively studying issues important to our denomination and issuing a report for our consideration during our Annual Meeting, has recently revised our principles and purposes represented by changes that will be voted on next year.

What I would suggest here is that these progressive principles, which continue to evolve to this day, have actually descended from the Nicene Creed. This is so because they have replaced various statements of faith that have been written over the centuries to help clarify our beliefs. Perhaps the first official evolution of the Nicene Creed was presented by Fancis David, the 16th Century Unitarian Bishop of Transylvania. Notice how closely it resembles the Creed, yet also how different it is.

I believe in one God, who is not a trinity, but that Father from whom all exist and we are in him... In this one most high God, Christ's Father, creator of heaven and earth we believe with strong faith... We believe in Jesus Christ, our only Lord, by whom all exist, the most high God's son, who is a man, born of King David's seed... and his being God's son had been proven... We do not confess him being God either in his essence or in his person... We believe in the holy spirit as being the spirit of the Father and the son... which comes from the Father through the

son to believers.⁶

Notice here a couple of things. Firstly, that this profession of faith goes out of its way to make the point that the Father and the Son are not the same person or of the “same essence,” which contradicts the Nicene Creed. But secondly, notice how little it reflects your beliefs or the beliefs of Unitarians today. How many of us would claim that Jesus Christ is “our only Lord, by whom all exist, the most high God’s son,” or the “holy spirit as being the spirit of the father and the son... which comes from the Father through the son to believers?” David’s statement is but a Unitarian rendition of the Nicene Creed, which eliminates the Trinitarian language, but remains strictly Christian nonetheless.

Now let’s jump ahead to 1803 when the American Universalists developed new articles of faith known as the “Winchester Profession.”

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.

Notice, once again, the slight evolution of terms, namely, that the nature of God is love, revealed through Christ, and the importance of doing good works. Herein we see the beginnings of defining God as a principle, rather than a person, and, more importantly, of living out those principles among ourselves. Yet, by and large, none of us today would feel comfortable expressing our faith in these terms.

Then, 90 years later, during their General Convention, the Universalists took the creed to the next level by proposing a new profession.

1. We believe in the Universal Fatherhood of God and the universal Brotherhood of Man.
2. We believe that God, who has spoken through all his holy prophets since the world began, hath spoken to us by his Son, Jesus Christ, our Example and Savior.
3. We believe that Salvation consists in spiritual oneness with God, who, through

⁶ Howe, Charles, A, *For Faith and Freedom*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1997, p. 108.

Christ, will finally gather in one the whole family of mankind.

So, you can see, we're getting a little closer emphasizing Jesus' humanitarian teachings, and are now opening ourselves to other prophets, yet these statements still leave us bound to Christianity. So, in 1933, another attempt was made;

The bond of fellowship in this Convention (church) shall be a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus reveled it and to co-operate in establishing the kingdom for which he lived and died.

To that end we avow our faith in God as Eternal and All-Conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of men of goodwill and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God.

This is a lot better, but still too stringently tied to Christianity to suit many UU's today. It wasn't until 1960, just a year before the Unitarians and Universalists merged into one Association that we get close.

We, Unitarian and Universalists, children of the Judeo-Christian heritage, inheritors of the wisdom of the universal prophets, eager to experience the insights of the great faiths of the world, open to all sources of inspiration, ancient and modern, determined to explore the boundless ocean of truth which lies about on every hand and on before, and welcoming into fellowship all men of whatever background of faith, here together on this night of Consolidation, conscious of the presences of the past, and of our urgent tasks, dedicate ourselves anew to the free and universal fellowship of all mankind that is the church to be.

This gets real close to where we're at today, and is the obvious precursor to those principles I stated earlier that were adopted in 1985, and that are once again being reconsidered today.

So, when it comes to the question of Jesus, and what he's meant and means to Unitarian Universalism, it might be best to conclude that the more things have changed, the more they're remained the same. Despite our 2000-year-old dialectic, this struggle to liberate our language and ourselves from traditional religion, the one thing that has remained the same throughout our history is our commitment to putting the teachings of Jesus, the man, into practice. And I hope this never changes.