

## Why Unitarian Universalists Make the Best Catholics

By

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Christians have been around a long time and are, arguably, the world's most dominant religion. But they have not always been as successful as you might think. 300 years after Jesus' execution, Christians accounted for less than 5 percent of the Roman Empire's population, which was then dominated by pagans. Historian David Chidester says, "the cities of the empire remained pagan with the support of the aristocracy, the military, and the intelligentsia, the peasantry maintained the countryside as a pagan domain by preserving ancestral rituals of the land, the seasons, and the hearth."<sup>1</sup> In fact these *pagans*, a term that literally means, "country folk," detested Christians, who were primarily confined to the major cities. This was so because the early Christians refused "to pay ritual respect to Roman gods and rulers." In other words, they didn't go to church! So anything that went wrong, "war, civil unrest, crop failures, storms, and earthquakes," Chidester says, "were attributed to the impiety of Christians."<sup>2</sup> So the pagans took to sacrificing Christians, a minority whom they chose to project all their blame and hatred on, in order to appease the angry gods.

It's really astounding that Christianity, represented by such a small and despised class, not only survived, but eventually flourished. This was due, as we all know, to Roman Emperor Constantine suddenly converting to Christianity and making it a legally recognized religion in 313. About 50 years later, in 381, Emperor Theodosius I made it the *only* legally recognized form of worship. So now the tables were turned, and it was the city mouse's country cousin, the pagans, who eventually became persecuted into near extinction.

But it can also be argued that the Christianity of Jesus' earliest followers also dissipated into oblivion almost as soon as it became a state institution. That which Constantine legally recognized would have looked unrecognizable to those in the Christian minority who refused, at great risk to their own lives, to fulfill their civic responsibility to participate in public worship by paying tribute to the Roman gods and rulers. But under Constantine theirs became the public worship others were legally bound to participate in. Indeed, after becoming legal, the Christians abandoned their secret gathering places among the cemeteries and catacombs and were allowed to conduct their services in public buildings, which is why, to this very day, church sanctuaries, with their high vaulted ceilings and ornament, resemble the Roman basilicas instead of caves.

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<sup>1</sup> Chidester, David, *Christianity: A Global History*, Harper San Francisco, Harper Collin Publishers, New York, NY, 2000, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, prior to Constantine, the thought that a Christian could serve in the military was unthinkable, being that they were nonviolent like Jesus, their founder. But Constantine was a man of violence who converted to Christianity only on the battlefield in the hope Christ might bring him victory. Under Constantine the entire military became Christianized, and Christianity became militant. The Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, and today the most powerful remnant of what was once the most powerful civilization on Earth is the Holy Roman Catholic Church.

This outline of the Church's history, albeit brief, ought to be enough to make us wonder if Catholics aren't better Romans than they are Christians? If, after Christianity was Romanized, and Christians stopped acting like Jesus and started acting like Romans, we must wonder what has really been going on the past 1700 years. Has the church been promoting the teachings of Jesus, or trying to expand the Empire?

Constantine, once a devotee of Apollo, the god of War, was declared Emperor by his own army—a force none dare challenge. According to the legend, the night before a battle he saw a vision of cross in the sky with the inscription, "Conquer by this." The next day he had all his army's pagan symbols removed and replaced with crosses, then went on to win the battle. He became a convert and Christianity became unrecognizable as the religion of a powerful militant. And though the story of his vision is most likely apocryphal, this power driven soldier had his reasons for converting and legalizing Christianity, and, more importantly, promoting it as the religion that would not only unite his Empire, but earn him the unprecedented devotion and cooperation of his citizens.

It happened like this, a very grateful Christian Bishop, Eusebius, declared Constantine to be the fulfillment of biblical prophecy and drew an analogy between Christ and Emperor in which the latter should be viewed as the Christian ruler on Earth just as Christ is the ruler of heaven. As such, the Emperor had become Christ on Earth, what Eusebius called, "The Friend of God." And as God's friend, it was up to the Emperor to "interpret the Word of God,"<sup>3</sup> a task that was later passed on to the Pope. Embracing his role as "the Friend of God," Constantine was determined to make his church, "catholic," a term that means, "whole," or, "universal," which to him meant enforcing a strict uniformity of belief and practice. Indeed, a major step in this direction was his commission of the Council of Nicaea in 323, in which he invented the doctrine of the Trinity by instructing the conveners to use the term *homoousias* when writing what would become the Nicene Creed. It's a Greek term meaning, "one substance," referring to the relation between the Father and the Son. As you may know, the Creed begins...

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all

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<sup>3</sup> Chidester, *ibid.*, p. 96.

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 (*homoousias*) with the Father, by whom all things were made.

So, if we follow the train of thought here, that the Emperor is the same as Christ, and Christ is the same as God, then the Emperor must be God. How convenient for Constantine. Yet even so, if we give the Emperor the benefit of the doubt by presuming his vision of a unified Church might bring peace throughout the Empire, we must find fault with his understanding of what it means to be *catholic*. Constantine made a classic mistake in confusing, as psychologist Erich Fromm once pointed out, “Equality for ‘sameness,’ rather than ‘oneness.’”<sup>4</sup> In short, Constantine, like many rulers of the Catholic Church since, believed that to be unified everyone must be the same. Unfortunately the only way to maintain such a society is to eradicate anyone who is different, which, as we all know, has often been the history of Catholicism.

But the word *catholic* is itself a very good word and is not at all unlike what our faith means when we say *Universalist*. “Catholic” and “Universalist” are virtually the same words. But our history as Unitarian Universalists differs greatly from our Catholic forbears. Our first Unitarian ruler, for example, John Sigismund, the 16<sup>th</sup> century King of Transylvania, did not see equality as sameness, but as oneness, and it was this Unitarian King who issued the first law promoting religious tolerance in human history. The Edict of Torda, of 1568, says, in part, that “...in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied... and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God...”

You see, our concept of *wholeness*, of cath-holism, isn’t about making everyone think and act alike, but of including everyone regardless of their beliefs and ways. This is really the idea behind our *Universalism*; not only is there no such thing as Hell for punishing those who are different, but there are no gates in heaven either, everyone gets in. Our is black *and* white thinking, as apposed to the Empire’s black *or* white thinking that must include one at the exclusion of the other. If it accepts white, it utterly rejects and denies the existence of black. The world must either be pagan *or* Christian, Christian *or* Protestant, believer *or* unbeliever. But, as Universalists, we embrace believer *and* unbeliever alike, pagan *and* Christian, Christian *and* Muslim, Buddhist *and* Hindu *and* Humanist *and* Atheist—we embrace

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<sup>4</sup> Fromm, Erich, *The Art of Loving*, A Bantam Book, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1956, 1963, p. 12.

black *and* white and all the shades of gray in between, and all the colors of the rainbow! For we know, as King Sigismund's famous Unitarian Bishop, Francis David so succinctly declared, "We need not think alike, to love alike!"

And now, as Unitarian Universalists, though we can no longer call ourselves an exclusively Christian religion, our faith communities hearken back to the Christianity before Constantine, to that time in which believers truly put the nonviolent teachings of Jesus into practice and valued, above all else, the freedom to keep their religion separate from the State. Ours may not be *Catholicism* with a capital "C," but it is, ironically, the kind of *catholicism* Constantine had hoped for; the kind that can truly bring Unity to the Empire, not by forcing everyone to be the same, but by providing everyone equal rights within our communities, regardless of their differences. As Unitarian Universalists we make the best Catholics, because we understand that being catholic means "oneness."