

ARE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS CHRISTIAN?

No question is asked of me more frequently than this one: “Are Unitarian Universalists Christian?” There are various reasons why people ask this question. Some ask it simply out of curiosity. Others want to know if our movement regards itself as one of the hundreds of denominations which declare themselves to be Christian or does it deny such a connection? And some folks are pondering: “If I join San Dieguito, would I have to sever my connection with my Christian background?” And still others, conversely, are thinking: “I don’t want anything at all from a congregation that’s tied to the Christian heritage.”

So, my response to this question—*are UU’s Christian?*—usually runs something like this:

“Well, some are and some aren’t. It’s not a question, you see, of whether or not you can or can’t be both Unitarian Universalist and Christian, but rather one of whether you choose or do not choose to own either label. Our religion majors in personal choices. And no one is able to either make or judge the choice of another spiritual pilgrim. Period.”

But I go further. “We UU’s, in truth, share divergent views on God, death and immortality, the sacraments, prayer and on every theological matter. Furthermore, you can even change your mind along the way, so you won’t necessarily end up believing what you came in believing. In short, each of us becomes the ultimate religious authority with respect to our beliefs and behaviors. For some, such authority is too burdensome, for us it’s a blessing.

Therefore, in sorting out where we stand on this crucial, single issue: Are UU's Christian? we must revert to the fundamental question: Do I consider *myself* a Christian, which, in turn, forces us to scrutinize the whole matter of what is a Christian?

It's not an easy question, because Christianity pervades our western civilization so thoroughly that we have trouble stepping apart from the cultural context to make an objective analysis. Being American and being Christian are synonymous in the minds of the majority.

I remember when I was performing a child celebration for a family in my very first congregation, some 40+ years ago. I always employ the phrase "child celebration," because the core of this rite is the *celebration* of the child, the *dedication* of the parents, and the *support* of the congregation. Parents and gathered friends are committing themselves to certain promises, but the child is simply being celebrated. No pressures, predictions, or prescriptions need be laid upon a baby. It didn't ask to be born; therefore, the child needs and deserves, first and foremost, simply to be rejoiced over...to be celebrated in a community of love.

Anyway, I was startled when the flowers came for the event with an accompanying card that read: "For the Christian-ing of the Lau baby!" Now, I have enough trouble "christening" anybody, for I'm inclined to leave that for ships and other inanimate objects. But, to *Christian* a child seemed utterly presumptuous, even wrongheaded, to me. To peg a fresh human being with any specific religious tag, before they begin to shape their own destiny, seems an invasion of dignity and a thwarting of spiritual growth.

I would feel the same uneasiness if someone asked me to “Muslim” or “Buddhist” or yes, “Unitarian Universalist” a baby. For I see this ceremony of beginnings as a opportunity to celebrate unreservedly this unique and fresh creation, then surround the child with faith, hope, and love...without ever dictating the child’s religious identity, which will ultimately, we contend, be their choice, when they come of age.

That single incident of Christian-ing the Lau baby reminded me that florists as well as most people in our country assume that the clergy’s job is indeed to *Christian* the child. Not so, in our tradition; we come to *celebrate* the child!

But what is the historical relationship between Unitarian Universalism and Christianity? The earliest Unitarians and Universalists tended to be folks whose upbringing had been in the Christian heritage. Our foreparents in the 16th century were part of the radical reformation, folks who challenged various aspects of orthodox Christianity’s dogmas such as the trinity, predestination, atonement, original sin, and eternal punishment. And when they were denounced as heretics and infidels, they repudiated the charges. In fact, they still considered themselves to be Christians, merely rational and liberal, rather than orthodox, ones.

The truth is that most of our 19th century giants such as Hosea Ballou, William Ellery Channing, Clara Barton, Horace Mann, Margaret Fuller, and even Ralph Waldo Emerson who initiated our turning eastward for inspiration, would have been startled, if you had said they weren’t Christian.

Today, however, Unitarian Universalism is quite different from what the overwhelming majority of people regard as Christianity; nonetheless, there are certainly still Unitarian Universalists who claim to be Christian in an honest and reverent sense of

the term. Indeed, there's an active organization within our movement that proudly points to an unbroken line of descent from indisputable Christian origins, just as there are groups of UUs for Jewish Awareness, and Buddhist, Pagan, and Humanist Fellowships, as well.

One such UU Christian puts it this way: "I affirm that Jesus is the central figure in human history and that his life, death, and victory are its pivotal event." Another says. "I'm a Christian, because I'm attracted to Jesus for his ethics more than his metaphysics." Some of you have described yourself to me as "spiritual Christians".

The varieties of UU Christians are many, just as there exist varieties of UU Jews and atheists, naturalists and theists. UU Christians tend to remain UU's, and here's the crunch, because they take Jesus seriously rather than literally, plus they enjoy in our movement a more inclusive and open-ended form of Christianity than anywhere else in town.

The nagging irony is that, whereas we include Christians in the UU fold, organized Christian groups often exclude us from theirs. Jews, Buddhists, Moslems, and UU's are welcome, for example, to work on task forces of the San Diego County Ecumenical Conference, which we often do, but are excluded from full membership because of the bedrock christo-centric confession of faith written into their purpose, namely: "We believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior."

The Jews are kept outside because of the Christ-centered emphasis. We UU's are kept outside, because we're a non-creedal religious group and will not compel our individual members to give assent to any particular confession of faith, let alone try to get an entire congregation to do so. Yet both Jews and Unitarian Universalists would

consider ourselves devoutly religious traditions and enterprises. And are usually deemed to be so, upclose and personal.

Okay, there's more to look at. How's Christianity to be evaluated as a religious venture?

Well, after helping in the downfall of the Greco-Roman civilization, Christianity did preserve countless books in the monasteries of the middle ages which also led to the reconstruction of the farming economy. And the great Renaissance cathedrals, music, and fine arts, soaked in Christian motifs, still enthrall us.

Furthermore, Christianity certainly borrowed from its Hebrew, Iranian, and Greek antecedents, but invariably with fresh inspiration and a grand energy of conviction, announcing the inalienable dignity of every soul fashioned in the image of God.

But, of course, for every good thing we find in Christian history, we also come upon some absurd and despicable deed. The crusades, the burning of heretics (including more than a few Unitarians), the resistance to science to this very day, the complicity of the church in the holocaust, the failure to give women full due and dignity.

How could a people of such extraordinary love also be a people of fanatical hate? It's reported that a bewildered Irishman, looking around at the religious dissension in his unhappy land, exclaimed, "Would God we were atheists, so we could live together like Christians!" Indeed, the history of Christendom has been about as mixed up as the Irishman's wish indicates.

Today, although we're centering upon Christianity, some words about Jesus are crucial, for he was the pivotal figure in the historical drama which birthed the religion of

Christianity, and, alas, the two don't always resemble one another, any more than Unitarian Universalists always resemble the best of our ancestors!

However, Jesus was truly an elusive character. Many still claim to experience him directly, yet only sketchy biographical notes about his life are available and those are often in conflict. He appears under various guises. There's Jesus as the symbol and founder of a faith who is worshipped as the Christ. There's Jesus as a person whose life on earth was only 33 or so years long and whose public career probably lasted no longer than a year. There are the moral teachings of Jesus which are sprinkled throughout the gospel reports. And there are countless modern re-interpretations of Jesus growing out of ever-expanding archaeological discoveries.

It all makes one want to yell out: "Will the real Jesus please stand up?" And he doesn't, and he can't. Hence, my friends, there will always remain a different Jesus for everyone who cares to depict him.

There's a modern day piece of humor that runs something like this: "Who do people say that I am?" asked Jesus. "Well," say the disciples, "some say you're the ground of being, others say you're the existential source of ambience, and still others claim you're the ontological center of meaning!" And Jesus replies: "Huh!"

You see, all such contemporary reinterpretations of Jesus' identity may furnish scholarly stimulation, but they don't really alter, it seems to me, the baseline requirement for Christianity, namely: "I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior."

I contend that if we can say yes to any part of that core assertion, then we can claim to be card-carrying Christians. In other words, even though many UU's call

themselves Christian on historical, ethical, or spiritual grounds, I'm impelled personally to affirm that Christianity truly demands a doctrinal commitment as well.

From my perspective, to believe in Jesus as an exemplary prophet or as a superior ethical model or even as the son of God is sufficient to make one a Unitarian Universalist but not sufficient to make one a Christian. To be a Christian is to claim more about Jesus: namely, that he is your Lord and Savior, indeed the same being as God. And while respecting and utilizing many lessons from Christianity, I can't honestly claim to be one. For I say that Jesus was a human being. And the Christian believes Jesus is God.

Nonetheless, many of my UU friends and colleagues would disagree with me. So the bottom line, again, is self-ascription. I'm back to where I started: how do you name yourself? For me, it just doesn't fit to call myself a Unitarian Universalist and a Christian, but I sincerely respect my Unitarian Universalist kin who do.

Let me put it another way. I'm powerfully influenced by the character and conduct of the Nazarene, but I don't adore or revere, let alone worship, him. In fact, I don't worship any human figure. However, I've learned much from brother Jesus... especially based upon recent discoveries of progressive New Testament scholars, whose findings would make Mel Gibson and Jerry Falwell and their ilk squirm and yelp.

For example the Jesus Seminar, which represents various faiths, in drawing upon 90 central sayings confidently attributed to Jesus, would offer claims like this, ones with which I agree:

Jesus didn't consider himself a messiah nor did he send his disciples out to evangelize the world. This is essentially the marketing venture of the early Christian Church.

These progressive biblical scholars also contend that Jesus rarely mentions God and harbors no particular doctrine of God. Wow, more heresy. They claim that he was spiritually akin to Buddha or Socrates, holy figures who spoke in parables and paradoxes, occasionally illuminating issues, but frequently leaving us swimming in confusion.

There's more about this radical Jesus that I like. The Nazarene recommended celebrating over either prayer or fasting, regularly cavorting with sinners and prostitutes, indiscriminate in his eating and drinking habits, a veritable party-hound. Actually, too much of one, for this 66-year-old, but then again, he was only half my age when he died.

The Jesus Seminar also depicts Jesus as "a powerful social outcast" in that women accompanied him publicly, which was against the mores of his day, and furthermore, he treated children as fellow humans rather than customary chattel. Think of that. Sounding more and more like one of us, right?

So, although I don't consider myself a Christian of any sincere sort, I personally resonate with several of these conclusions which modern day progressive researchers have drawn. Why? Because they mesh with our UU principles of religious freedom, internal authority, social compassion, and inclusion of the marginalized.

But lest we try to claim Jesus as yet another Unitarian Universalist (as we often foolishly try to do with other historical personages) it's humbling to remember that the Nazarene challenged the smugness, corruption, and pedantry of *all* religious types, and, if he were sitting in any of our congregations today (including San Dieguito) we'd be unable to elude his well-aimed, stinging barbs.

For there are unquestionably things Jesus didn't say in his era that we religious liberals wished he had and plenty of unsettling counsel he likely voice today that we'd

prefer to ignore. You get my point! There's simply no way to tailor or tame Jesus into a like-minded spiritual buddy, any more than we can do it with Lao-tzu, Esther, Krishna or Mohammed.

Let me close this way.

I've tried, as I grow older, to honor the best in my Protestant Christian upbringing, but I can't deny that I chose to leave it, moving on to establish residence in Unitarian Universalism over the past four decades, a home which I find both roomy and welcoming, imperfectly healthy, hospitable for self and stranger, for daring thought and compassionate action, a home which although basically sound, lies always in need of renovation and repair...literally as well as symbolically. But a good-enough spiritual home for me to dwell in for the remainder of my days.

And what about me and Jesus? Well, as a child, Jesus was my savior, as a youth he became my guide, then we parted ways for awhile. Now as my religious quest matures, Jesus returns more as a brother...like Clara Barton is my sister—provocative companions, chock-full of surprises.

Shalom and Salaam, blessed be and Amen.

Tom Owen-Towle

September 28, 2008