

## **Our UU Relationship to Christianity<sup>1</sup>**

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*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

Unitarian Universalism honors the wisdom of many traditions, but our own tradition emerged out of Christianity, and it has been a complex and often conflicted relationship for two centuries. Today we will explore some of those dynamics over time. We will begin with a hymn expressing the importance of love, our greatest value which came to us from the Christian tradition of our ancestors.

### REFLECTION: PART 1

#### *Where We Come From*

Looking at Unitarian Universalism today, we function like an interfaith congregation, with members of many different beliefs and practices. We draw from the wisdom of many different traditions, as well as the rigors of science and the wonders of the natural world. A few of our church members from time to time have asked me, “Why do we treat Christianity differently from other religions? Why do we easily share wisdom from Buddhism or Hinduism, but find it difficult to share wisdom from Christianity?” To answer that question, we have to look at our history.

While we draw from many sources, our own historical roots are in the Christian reformation, and this has shaped our culture as well as our values. It is why we meet on Sundays, and have sermons and hymns, and why we ordain ministers as leaders in our congregations. But it is also perhaps why our relationship to Christianity is more complex and conflicted than with others of our sources.

Unitarians and Universalists emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup> as a critical response to the Christian theologies of their time. In those days, most church-going folk were hearing from the pulpit messages about sin and hell and damnation. Unitarian ministers began instead to speak of a benevolent God, and the Universalists proclaimed that a loving God would send no one to hell. I am simplifying their critique, of course. But the important thing I want to say is that they began an argument with the prevailing Christian beliefs of their compatriots.

As I noted last week, people have been arguing about the meaning of the life and person of Jesus for 2000 years. Our forbears were part of that argument. They were a part of the movement to apply scholarly analysis to the interpretation of the Bible. They were receptive to the new discoveries of science in biology and evolution. They were weighing their scriptural understandings by the knowledge to be gained from human reason and study. Last week I read part of a sermon from William Ellery Channing that spoke about their beliefs in the humanity of Jesus, the unity of God, and the need to interpret the Bible according to all of the scholarship of which humankind was capable.

Both Unitarians and Universalists started out as Christian churches proclaiming a kinder God, and a gentler understanding of salvation. They rejected the orthodox idea of the day concerning atonement: that an offended God demanded the bloody sacrifice of his son Jesus, in order to atone for the sins of human beings. They began to preach about God as infinite love. They began to preach about the inherent worth and dignity of human beings, a value which eventually was incorporated as our first UU principle.

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2 I am referring here to their origins in America as religious movements. There were earlier related movements in Europe.

It is important to point out that dialogue about the person of Jesus, about God and love and redemption continued within other Christian faiths as well. We do a disservice to Christianity when we assume that there is only one interpretation to be found there. Many other mainstream Christian denominations also moved toward the image of a more benevolent God and a tradition informed by reason and science as well as the scriptures. The Unitarians had argued most with, and eventually split off from, the Congregationalists, but today their successor, the United Church of Christ, is among our closest allies in liberal thought, social justice and human rights.

So one answer to the question of why we relate differently to Christianity is because of our historical rootedness within the Christian arguments about Jesus and God.

Our anthem today is a hymn that was written by Rev. Russell Streeeter, the first minister of our own predecessor church. He was called in 1821 to serve the First Universalist Society of Portland.

ANTHEM                      God and His Perfections                      Russell Streeeter/Josquin DePrez

REFLECTION PART 2                      *Critical Thinking*

One of the most significant ideas we carried into the present from our past was the importance of critical thinking. According to an online dictionary, critical thinking may be defined as the objective analysis and evaluation of an issue in order to form a judgment. This value shows up in our UU principles as our affirmation of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

Now “critical thinking” may sound almost like the opposite of another affirmation--that of tolerance for the beliefs of other people. We have to remember that our commitment to tolerance emerged during a time when people were jailed or put to death for harboring viewpoints that differed from the norm. Tolerance was never meant to inhibit argument and discussion between people who hold differing ideas. Occasionally, these days, we carry that tolerance to illogical extremes, as if any belief is just as good as any other. But that was never what was meant by a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

UU theologian James Luther Adams tells us that it is in community we can best find what is worthy of our belief. And only by really listening and seeking to understand the beliefs of others can we make good judgments about what to believe ourselves. Reasonable people can come to differing conclusions about truth and meaning. Even critical thinking can be carried too far, if we fail to take into account the limits of our reasoning. But as UUs we are encouraged to use our minds, to weigh our feelings, to pay attention to the knowledge and wisdom of others, as we seek to make sense of our lives and our world.

Some of us have a personal history with Christian churches in which we were discouraged from asking questions or using our minds. Obedience to authority was seen as a higher virtue than critical thinking. So another way our UU relationship with Christianity is different from that with our other sources is that we are still engaged in a critical dialogue with those other beliefs as we seek to come to our own conclusions.

I still have close family members who are part of very fundamentalist or hierarchical Christian churches, and I know that many of you do as well. I cringe when I hear my sister talk about dinosaurs and human beings living at the same time on an earth that is only 6000 years old.

My own critical thinking guides me to learn from the scientific consensus, and my spirituality leads me to a sense of wonder and gratitude for the amazing process of evolution. They also cause me to take seriously the ecological disasters that are being created by human-made climate change. Because I have studied the Bible using scholarly resources, I am able to argue with those who seek to use it against science.

Other faith traditions also face challenges between those who are fundamentalist or hierarchical in their approach, and those who value critical thinking. I think of the struggle between liberal Muslims and the jihadists who use the Koran to justify terror. It is not so different from the struggle between liberal Christians and rightwing Christian extremists.

I do not know the Koran and the Muslim tradition well enough to actually take part directly in that argument. Christianity is the prevalent religion in our culture, and I feel able to be part of that conversation, even though our Unitarian Universalist history eventually moved beyond the boundaries of the Christian community. When we draw on the resources of other traditions, we usually are choosing those elements within them that share certain fundamental values with our own.

Critical thinking is what helps us to see societal injustices and seek to make a change for the better. It was their critical thinking about their Christian values that compelled our forbears to seek to abolish slavery, and advocate for the rights of women. Those same values inspire us to work for justice for immigrants and for GLBT people. Along with many of our Christian allies.

Let us sing together another Christian hymn which is beloved by many UUs. John Newton, the author of its lyrics, had been a slave trader. But he woke up to the error of his ways, and left that life behind; he wrote this hymn to describe that change in his life.

HYMN

Amazing Grace

#205

READING: From *Walking Toward Morning: Meditations* Victoria Safford<sup>3</sup>

So... when we were all singing “Amazing Grace,” and we got to that bizarre moment in the first verse where our Unitarian Universalist hymnbook slaps down an asterisk and a choice, what did you do?

Which did you choose to sing: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a *wretch* like me” or “. . . that saved a *soul* like me”?

It probably depends on how you [are] feeling [to]day, how particularly wretched or soulful. I know of no other hymnal in print that virtually stops the singing in mid-measure to poll the congregation, to call for a theological debate within the mind and heart of every singer. And right there, quickly, because the pianist isn't going to wait for you, the congregation isn't going to wait for you, Sunday rolling on its way to Monday isn't going to wait for you, you have to stake your claim, make your mark, testify—all the while wondering if the person singing next to you will take offense if you confess at the top of your voice your own wretchedness and even our common condition as a fallen, faulty species.

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<sup>3</sup> This meditation is excerpted from *Walking Toward Morning: Meditations*, originally published by Victoria Safford. (Skinner House, 2003).

Or will your neighbor be annoyed, or maybe shocked, if you stand there warbling on about what a pleasant soul you are, what a nice, well-rounded, fully individuated, sin-free, guilt-free humanist soul? There you stand, frozen in time, and the music plays on while you hastily cobble a theology.

We sing our song in different keys and cadences. We are on our own to make a faith out of nothing, which is to say, out of everything we have. That is daunting, lonely work, demanding and relentless work, the work of a lifetime, and I suspect it is the very scope of it that keeps our tiny movement small. Not everyone wants to stop singing in the middle of the song and consider once again and all alone the nature of the human soul and God, infinity within and infinity without. It's a lot to ask of people on a Sunday morning.

### REFLECTION, PART 3 *Current Day UU Christians*

My colleague Tom Shade once put forth an "Iron Rule of UU Theological Discourse," which says something like this: "Any statement that attempts to describe the relationship between UUism and Christianity...will be debated."<sup>4</sup>

Tom himself talks about how Christianity is different from our other sources because it is our institutional source, our historical source, and for many, a personal source. That could also be said, in part, for Judaism. But other faith traditions are more apt to be inspirational or philosophical sources. We may draw upon their ideas, but we don't have the same deeply embedded threads that connect us or from which we are trying to disentangle ourselves.

Our complex UU relationship with Christianity must also account for current day Unitarian Universalists who identify as Christian UUs, or UU Christians. In fact, there is an organization, the UU Christian Fellowship that offers support and resources for those who, as they say in their mission, are "freely following Jesus."<sup>5</sup> On their website, the Rev. Dr. Thomas Wintle describes three trends among their members, three different types of UU Christians. I thought it might be helpful to share those descriptions. Perhaps you might recognize yourself among them, or find greater understanding for UU Christians in our midst.

The first type of UU Christian resonates with classical Unitarian and Universalist beliefs. He writes, "Theirs is a low-keyed Christianity that focuses on the human life and ethical teachings of Jesus. They see doctrines such as the Trinity and the Atonement as unnecessary, perhaps prefer to speak of "*christenings*" rather than "*baptisms*," and view communion as a quiet memorial of the life of Jesus. The Bible, interpreted with reason and modern scholarship, provides the myths and symbols and stories that enable them to speak of God and to instill moral values. Believing that theirs is "*the religion of Jesus, not the religion about Jesus*," they see the Galilean as a great teacher and the exemplar of a life of love to God and love to humankind. In the words of one layperson: "*Jesus is the leader you don't adore, but can't ignore*." To be a Christian, they might say, is "*to follow Jesus*."<sup>6</sup>

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4 Quoted in a FB conversation.

5 <http://www.uuchristian.org>

6 [http://www.uuchristian.org/S\\_Who2.html](http://www.uuchristian.org/S_Who2.html)

The second type, which might be called Ecumenical Christians, are attracted to a broad and inclusive Christianity that transcends old denominational differences and seeks out the best from all of Christian history. They are informed by both Protestant dissent and Catholic tradition. ...Theologically, they affirm the unity of God who is revealed in the Christ-event, in the person of Jesus Christ and in the believing reception of the Church. Liturgically, they are nourished by the sacraments, the psalms, the proclamation of the gospel... and the great prayers and hymns and anthems of the Church. They are interested in personal disciplines of prayer and spiritual growth. Believing that our Unitarian Universalism provides a theological freedom afforded in few other churches, they participate in ecumenical dialogue, feel the brokenness of Christ's Church, and affirm the common discipleship shared by all Christians. To be a Christian, they might say, is *"to be part of the Body of Christ."*

The third type of UU Christian he calls Liberation Christians.

Finding in Christianity a radical call for the liberation of the oppressed, these Unitarian Universalist Christians emphasize the prophetic and ethical demands of the Gospel. Christ was *"the one for others,"* and the Church is the community of discipleship called to help heal the brokenness of the world. ...the Spirit is present to ensure, empower, embarrass, and challenge; to demand a world better than it is now .... To be a Christian, they might say, is *"to do the work of Christ."*

Finally, there are also those whom he calls Questioning Christians, those who are "attracted to the figure of Jesus, but are uncertain of what it all means or how to reconcile Christian faith with the assumptions and the skepticism of a modern secular world."

The UU Christian Fellowship is a resource for anyone who wants to explore what it might mean to follow Jesus in a Unitarian Universalist way. It is also a reminder for all of us that there are UU ways of being a Christian. For those who have been wounded by certain branches of the Christian tradition, it can be an eye opener to witness a Christianity that offers a different model of following Jesus.

When I think of UU Christians, I especially remember Ted Tuttle, a member of my previous congregation. He was a gay man who had been active in another Christian denomination, but somehow found his way to First Parish in Brewster. He wondered whether a Christian could be a UU, and talked about it to one of his former mentors. His mentor asked a question—Would Jesus feel at home in your new church? And Ted, reflecting on it, decided that Jesus would feel very much at home, because love was alive in that church. And so he stayed, and I had the privilege to know him. I think Jesus would feel at home in our church, too. May it be so.

\*HYMN

Immortal Love

#10

#### CLOSING WORDS

In the words of an old Universalist covenant:  
Love is the doctrine of this church.  
The quest for truth is its sacrament  
And service is its prayer.  
To the end that all souls shall grow  
Into harmony with the divine.