

**Roots**  
**The Unitarian Universalism of Jesus**  
**By**  
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There's an old joke from back in the 60s about a teenage boy who starts begging his parents for a car. Being the 1960's, they tell him they'll buy him a car if he agrees to get a haircut. "But what's wrong with long hair?" He argues, "Lots of people have long hair. Even Jesus had long hair."

"That may be true," his parents say, "but Jesus also walked everywhere he went."

This is a fun way to point out just how pliable Jesus really is. It's impossible to know much about who he really was, or even if he really was, which means we can turn him into just about anyone we want; most usually into someone just like us, even into a longhaired hippie without any wheels. Albert Schweitzer once said, "There is no historical task which reveals [one's] true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus."<sup>1</sup> Or, as theologian, Frederick Buechner put it, "All theology... is at its heart autobiography."<sup>2</sup> In other words, when we write about our gods we are unconsciously really just writing about ourselves, about our own desires, beliefs, and values. Or, as the philosopher Voltaire simply said, "If God has made us in his image, we have returned the favor."

Think about all the blue-eyed, blond headed actors like Max Von Sydow, Jeffery Hunter, and Ted Neeley that Hollywood has cast in the role of Jesus. Likewise, John Dominic Crossan, a member of the Jesus Seminar who has written numerous scholarly books about the historical Jesus, portrays him as a nonviolent revolutionary raised in poverty, just as he was himself raised in poverty during the revolution in Ireland. Professor Hyam Maccoby, a contemporary Jewish scholar considers Jesus an ancient Jewish scholar. Walter Wink, a Peace Fellow at the U.S. Institute of Peace, writes of a peaceful Jesus who came to help us break our cycle of violence. There's even a book out there written by a business consultant entitled, "Jesus, CEO."

Despite knowing all of this, it is in great earnest that I'd like to make the claim today that Jesus was a Unitarian Universalist. The fact that I happen to be a Unitarian Universalist myself is purely coincidental and I'm sure doesn't reflect any unconscious bias on my part. I know the Unitarians and the Universalists didn't form our Association, the UUA, until 1961, which may cause some to conclude there were no Unitarian Universalists until just 55 years ago. This is probably why religion researchers currently list Unitarian Universalism as an NRM, a new

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<sup>1</sup> Herzog, William R., *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God*, *ibid.*, p. 5f.

<sup>2</sup> Buechner, Frederick, *The Sacred Journey*, (Harper SanFrancisco, Harper & Row, New York, NY, 1991) p. 1.

religious movement. But the ideas upon which our faith is founded and named, have both been around for centuries. I would argue, in fact, that Unitarianism and Universalism predate Christ and were central to his religious mindset.

For if the Christ of faith has any basis in a historical figure named Jesus, then, among the few things we can be almost certain of about this figure is that he was Jewish. A small number of the stories about him and teachings attributed to him may be rooted in some historical truth, although most are surely fiction. But, again, if there really was a man named Jesus, then given the origins of the gospel stories, he was almost certainly a Jewish man. Whether he was a Rabbi, a poor carpenter, a zealot, as some have argued, cannot be known. But the relatively secure fact that he must have been Jewish tells us one thing, he must also have been a Unitarian.

It is true that archeologists have unearthed thousands of fertility idols in the ruins of ancient Jewish homes, suggesting they weren't all as monotheistic as the Hebrew scripture might indicate. But, by and large, the Hebrews emphasized devotion and loyalty to just one supreme deity, Yahweh. This doesn't mean they didn't believe in other gods, they just thought theirs was the best and mightiest god.

Interestingly, it wasn't the Hebrews who invented monotheistic religion, but their sworn adversaries, the Egyptians, when, around 1350 BCE, Pharaoh declared that Aten was the supreme deity within the Egyptian pantheon and made it illegal for his people to worship any of the others. As one of the ancient hymns to Aten said, "Oh, Thou only God! There is no other God than Thou!"<sup>3</sup> After the Pharaoh's death, however, the people soon returned to their polytheistic beliefs. It was because of this episode, however, that Sigmund Freud theorized that Moses himself was actually an Egyptian who preferred monotheism to polytheism, a belief he tried to instill in those Hebrew followers he led through the wilderness.

Whether Freud was right about Moses or not, we know that monotheism had been around long before Jesus, and that by the time he was born, the Hebrews, who had come to be called Jews because they lived in Judea, were part of a monotheistic culture, meaning they believed in just one god. In other words, they held a Unitarian theology. Nowadays, most dictionaries say a Unitarian is a Christian who doesn't believe in the Trinity, but this definition puts the cart far ahead of the horse. For, as some of you have heard me say before, Unitarianism precedes the Trinitarian doctrine. The doctrine that the Father and Son are of one substance was made official by the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, in reaction against the belief that Jesus was a man, not God, because there is only one God. A few decades later the Church fathers officially added the Holy Ghost to the mix, the Trinity was complete, and Unitarianism, the belief in one God, became illegal. But, again, whatever else we can presume to be true about him, Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian, and, like all his original Jewish followers, he too would have held a Unitarian theology.

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<sup>3</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Moses and Monotheism*, Vintage Books, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., New York, NY, 1939, p. 38.

Universalism, originally the unconditional love of God, was also an idea that had been introduced in Jewish culture long before Jesus. The story of Jonah in the Hebrew Scriptures, for example, is a Universalist parable. Jonah, a caricature of a Jewish prophet, is told to go to Nineveh and warn the people there to turn from their wicked ways before it's too late. But Jonah is prejudice against the Ninevites, who aren't Jewish, and would rather see them destroyed. So he makes a getaway aboard a ship. Eventually the worried crew tosses him overboard and he's swallowed by a big fish. Three days later he tells Yahweh he's sorry and gets spit up onto dry land. He then goes to Nineveh and convinces its inhabitants to turn over a new leaf.

"This is exactly what I knew was going to happen," he grumbles, "That's why I tried to run away. I knew you're compassion and love would get the best of you and you would end up sparing these damn people! God I wish I was dead!" Now it happens that Jonah is enjoying the shade of broadleaf plant until a worm chews on it and causes it to wither. Angry and tormented by the tremendous heat, Jonah again says, "God I wish I was dead."

"Are you really that angry about a plant?" Yahweh asks.

"You bet I am!" Jonah says, "Would somebody please just shoot me!"

"So you're concerned about a plant that springs up and dies overnight," Yahweh says, "but I'm not supposed to care for 120,000 people, not to mention all the other creatures living in this city?"

What a contrast to so many of those dreadful passages in the Hebrew scriptures in which Yahweh instructs his chosen people to wipe out everyone else. Surely a historical Jesus would have known this story, which may help explain his own Universalist attitude toward others. The gospel accounts are full of stories about his inclusion of outcasts. Just as Jonah is angry about Yahweh's compassion for the Ninevites, Jesus is often criticized for associating with the unclean untouchables of his day, with those who had been demonized by the authorities, with those sexually exploited and victimized women his society called prostitutes, with traitors, like tax collectors and other government employees forced to work for Rome, and with those considered cursed by God simply because they were sick or disabled.

There are a couple of powerfully moving stories making this point. They are apocryphal, meaning we know they were made up and didn't really happen, but they are no less meaningful just because, like most everything else in the Bible, they didn't really happen. They're both found in the *Gospel of John*, written near the start of 2<sup>nd</sup> century, long after Jesus' death and the legends about him grew. The first is about a sexually exploited woman who is accused of adultery and is about to be stoned to death by a mob because that's what the Good Book says should happen. Of course there's no mention of the man she is supposed to have committed adultery with. You know the story, Jesus says, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." Then he sees one rock wiz by and exclaims, "Mom!"

No, that's not it. The crowd slowly disperses and Jesus is left alone with the frightened, embarrassed woman. This is the point I like to ask if anyone remembers the first thing he said to her? Most often people respond, "Go and sin no more." But that's not what he said. Imagine being there, standing before a holy man, alone and ashamed, and the first thing he says is, "Where are your accusers?" In other words, even though Jesus remained, there wasn't anyone left to condemn her because he wasn't in the business of judging others. That's Universal, unconditional love and acceptance, and it must have been really good news in a puritanical culture that left too many people out.

My favorite such story, however, is about Jesus' encounter with a Samaritan woman drawing water from Jacob's well. "Can I have a drink?" He asks.

"But you are a Jew, and I am a Samaritan," she says, "How can you ask me such a thing?"

The story gets kind of crazy after this, but the point is that Jesus has no problem openly violating all kinds of cultural taboos in order to include others. Firstly, as the woman points out, he is Jewish, and Jews aren't supposed to associate with Samaritans. Secondly, he's a man, and men aren't supposed to address women in public. And, thirdly, he is a Holy man who asks to drink from the same cup that has surely touched this woman's unclean lips a hundred times. So, in one fell swoop, this story defies racism, sexism, and religious elitism, exposing them as bogus excuses for excluding and considering ourselves superior to others. This, again, is what Universalism is all about. As Universalist evangelist John Murray famously proclaimed, "Give them hope, not hell!" which seems to be what Jesus does in these imaginative accounts.

Like his Unitarian theology, Jesus' Universalism also preceded the puritanical, exclusionary doctrines that eventually supplanted it. As I often like to remind people, the first systematic Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria, was a Universalist, meaning he didn't believe in eternal hell because it conflicted with his notion of an all-loving god. 250 years after his death, Origen's writings were declared anathema, but the point is that Jesus' original followers, who were also Jewish, had Unitarian theologies and the early Christians remained attracted to his Universalist teachings well into the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

Again, it wasn't until 325 CE that Unitarianism was replaced with Trinitarianism, and nearly two hundred years after that before the Church officially embraced eternal damnation. Afterward, these two fundamental tenants of our faith, Unitarianism and Universalism, remained all but forgotten until the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the invention of the printing press allowed ordinary people to read the Bible for themselves. One of those people, a young Spanish theologian named Michael Servetus, was stunned to discover there was no mention of a Trinity in it. He couldn't wait to tell everyone, which got him burned at the stake by John Calvin.

Calvin, who obviously didn't like Unitarianism, liked Universalism even less. Calvin, you may recall, is the theologian who came up with the doctrine of Predestination, the belief that only a select few have been elected for salvation and everyone else has been chosen for eternal Hell. So the heretical doctrine of Universalism, that salvation is for everyone, also reemerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in reaction against Calvin's elitist theology.

Ever since being reawakened, both Unitarianism and Universalism have continued to evolve. Unitarianism, by believing in only God, has, thus, long emphasized the humanity of Jesus, which explains why Humanism originated from Unitarianism, and why nearly half the signers of the Humanist manifesto were Unitarian ministers, including the founder of Religious Humanism, John Dietrich, who was minister of this church from 1911 to 1916. Unitarianism is no longer about a belief in one god, but it does continue to emphasize human agency, reason, science, and, above all, that we ought not burn people over their ideas.

Universalism, likewise, has evolved over the centuries. It began as a disbelief in eternal Hell, in the belief, that is, that all souls will eventually be released from the torment of Hell. Not that the first Universalists, like Origen, didn't believe in Hell at all; they just thought it would eventually go away through God's continuing perfection of the Universe. Later, the Universalists began emphasizing the unconditional love of God, which resulted in the disbelief in Hell altogether. Today Universalists don't concern themselves with arguments about Hell at all, but focus, rather, on the radical inclusion of others, especially those who have been marginalized by the rest of society.

Today, in the broadest sense, Unitarianism simply means "One," and Universalism, means, "All." So there's your elevator speech. We're kind of like the Three Musketeers, "All for one and one for all." Although ours is rooted in the Christian tradition, Unitarian Universalism is no longer part of the Christian faith. Even those among us who identify more with Christian teachings aren't likely to be considered Christian's by others. This is so because even those of us, like myself, who remain influenced by Jesus, are inspired by his life, not his death, and by his own teachings, not made up teachings about him. We don't seek faith in Jesus, but the faith of Jesus, his faith in compassion for others. We don't believe salvation is something we receive from God, but something we must give to others, by putting the teachings of Jesus into practice, caring for the poor, the sick, the incarcerated and outcasts, and through forgiveness and nonviolence.

Of course, as I said at the start, we don't really know who Jesus was, or even if he was, let alone what he may have actually said and done. And when we try to figure it out, he usually ends up looking a lot like us. Still, I do believe it's reasonable to believe that Jesus held a Unitarian theology and practiced Universalist values. Today, I don't consider ours a Christian church because Jesus is no longer central to our values and beliefs. We draw as much inspiration from other religions and religious figures, as well as from philosophy, literature, art, nature, and science.

Yet, through all the nonsense that has emerged around this illusive figure, I tend to agree with Thomas Jefferson, who once said, “The doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child.”<sup>4</sup> He then took a razor to the Gospels and cut out all the stories of miracles, including the resurrection accounts, and every reference to the divinity of Jesus. And beneath it all, there are a few universal truths that have real staying power. Love one another, share your belongings, seek no more than what you need for today, your daily bread, forgive your enemies, practice nonviolence, heal the sick, feed the poor, open the mouths of those who have been silenced, uplift those who have been beaten down, listen to those who have been demonized, stand up for those who have been excluded, and help those who have been marginalized to stand up for themselves.

So maybe it’s a stretch to claim Jesus was a Unitarian Universalist, but I still find it interesting that after 2000 years of outgrowing our Christian heritage, our values remain rooted in the most basic teachings attributed to this simple sage. Since leaving the Southern Baptist faith 30 years ago, I have, at times, found myself angry with Christianity because of all the violence, and oppression, and ignorance some of its followers seem to promote, and sometimes I’ve been angry with the whole notion of God and think humanity would be better off giving the idea up altogether. But in all these years, amidst my feelings of anger and disappointment I have never harbored animosity toward this obscure figure called Jesus. And though I know whoever he really was is mostly lost to us, buried beneath centuries of fabrication and dogma, I sometimes feel his life and teachings are more central to my faith now than ever before.

I’m not a Christian, and maybe Jesus wasn’t exactly a Unitarian Universalist, but, whoever he was, if ever he was, I’m still a fan, and am doing my best to create a world that cares for its sick and its poor, a world without violence, a world where’s there’s enough for everyone and everyone is included.

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<sup>4</sup> Brodie, Fawn M, *Thomas Jefferson, an Intimate History*, Norton and Co., Inc., New York, NY 1974, p. 453.