

**Jesus**  
**By**  
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A couple of weeks ago I attended a local Native American prayer ceremony in support of the Standing Rock Sioux and their supporters who are protesting completion of the Dakota Access Oil Pipeline. The ceremony was led by several leaders of the Indian community who were dressed in traditional native regalia, including one gentleman from the Coeur d'Alene tribe wearing an authentic buckskin shirt and a magnificent pair of blue hand-beaded moccasins. As everyone was departing, it so happened this fellow and I ended up walking together. As we got to talking and he found out I'm a minister, he said, to my surprise, "Well, you and I share something in common; We both follow the man from Nazareth."

Actually, what we both shared in common was a benign prejudice about each other. I wasn't at all expecting a man so obviously into his Native American heritage to identify so strongly with Christianity, and he presumed that any white guy who says he's a minister in this country must be a Christian. He put his arm across my shoulder and I placed mine around his waist as we continued walking. "That's right," I said, partly because I didn't want to point out his error, partly because I didn't have the time to explain what my faith is about, and partly because I agreed with him; I do, in many ways, follow the teachings of "the man from Nazareth."

I often find that even us Unitarian Universalists can be as confused about our relationship to Christianity as anyone else. This is so, I think, because, unlike many religions, ours embraces change and, thus, has continued to evolve over the years. Unitarian and Universalist doctrines originated among those Christians who emphasized the humanity of Jesus and a disbelief in eternal damnation. Today, in Eastern Europe, where our faith is far more traditional, Unitarians still consider themselves Christians who simply emphasize the humanity of Jesus and putting his teachings into practice. Here in the U.S., however, where we have been strongly influenced by transcendentalism, humanism, and merged with Universalism, we have mostly lost our identity as a Christian religion.

Our confusion is compounded by the fact that historians differ over the origins of our faith. Some say it began with the 16<sup>th</sup> century theologian Michael Servetus who read the Bible for the first time and professed there is no mention of the Trinity in it. In this sense, Unitarianism, the belief in one god, is the antithesis of Trinitarianism, three gods in one. Others start as recently as 1961, when the two denominations for which we are now named came together to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. This is why researchers currently classify Unitarian Universalism as an NRM, a New Religious Movement, even though it has been around, in some form, for hundreds of years.

But when I teach Unitarian Universalist history, I still trace it all the way back to Jesus, although we have evolved a lot since then and no longer feel compelled to mention his name. Certainly there are a few among us who do identify as Christians, although they would not

be considered so by most mainstream Christians today. The difference being that UU Christians are not theocentric, meaning their faith is not defined exclusively upon what they believe about God. They may believe in God, although not in a Trinitarian god, but their primary focus is upon following the teachings of Jesus and being inspired by his life. In other words, just like other UUs, their religion is defined by what they do, not by what they believe. Although many other Christians also emphasize the need to follow his teachings, they, nevertheless, define themselves as such because they believe Jesus is a divine part of a triune godhead.

Today, according to the most recent research, 40 percent of our members describe themselves as secular, meaning they don't think of themselves as being religious at all, and another 20 percent say they are somewhat secular. That's 60 percent of us compared to only 15 percent of Americans in general. In general, 71 percent of Americans call themselves Christians, compared to less than 10 percent of Unitarian Universalists, who, even then, are not considered as such by most mainstream Christians. This is true, in fact, even in Eastern Europe where Unitarianism formally got its start and where, to this day, Unitarians still strongly believe in God, read from the Bible during all their church services, and consider Jesus their savior. Yet, in many countries there, including in Transylvania where our own Partner Church is, the more dominant orthodox churches often insist their Unitarian neighbors are not Christians because they reject the Trinity and, therefore, should not receive the State funding churches there depend upon. They are a minority fighting to survive in a world that doesn't consider them Christian even though they believe in God, the Bible, and Jesus.

Here in the U.S. it's even harder for Unitarian Universalists to make the case that they are Christians, partly because they belong to a mostly secular and humanistic religion, and partly because their definition of what it means to be a Christian is fairly different from that of the mainstream. Although I personally don't define myself as a Christian, given that Jesus is no longer central to my beliefs, I remain inspired by his life and teachings, maintain that Unitarian Universalists make great Christians because, whether we know it or not, we tend to actually follow his teachings, and I continue to argue that our faith began with him 2000 years ago.

I say this, first of all, because, whether we consider ourselves Christians, or are considered Christians by others or not, Unitarian Universalists continue to live by some of the fundamental values demonstrated through the life and teachings of Jesus—love everyone, share your belongings, don't take more than you need at the expense of others, heal the sick, care for the poor, practice nonviolent civil disobedience, work for justice and equality, and forgive those who have wronged you. I wouldn't say these values originated with Jesus, only that he promoted them and, very likely, was executed for doing so, which, if nothing else, makes him worthy of our admiration.

Before continuing, I must admit the historical Jesus is among the most nebulous figures ever to have lived. To discuss anything about him, what he actually said and did, is pure speculation. Some say he was an illiterate carpenter, some an educated Rabbi, some a Pharisee, some a Zealot, and some soundly argue that he is a complete work of fiction who

never existed at all. Without going into all my reasons, I have a few very basic assumptions about Jesus. Firstly, I assume he was a real person, although most of what has since been said about him is fiction. Secondly, I assume he was human, nothing more and nothing less. Thirdly, I assume some of his original teachings were handed down through oral tradition and eventually recorded in the Gospels, although the authors placed them within fictional contexts. Fourthly, I assume he was Jewish and held traditional Jewish ideas, especially about God. Finally, I assume he was eventually executed by the Roman authorities for challenging the status quo.

Beyond this, I have not gone through the Gospels to determine for myself which specific sayings and deeds attributed to him I consider authentic. In recent years the Jesus Seminar has, in my opinion, done a pretty good job of this, so I don't have to. The Jesus Seminar is comprised of hundreds of scholars whom, after years of research, voted to determine the historical reliability of the many claims about him. In the end, they've determined that less than 20 percent of everything Jesus is claimed to have said or done *may* have happened. But even this much is uncertain. They are far surer of the more than 80 percent they say never happened than they are of the less than 20 percent that believe *may* have happened, or, at least, may contain some small kernel of historical truth.

Yet, again, based upon my own formal biblical studies in college and graduate school, and following the work of the Jesus Seminar and other biblical scholars, I assume Jesus' authentic teachings can be boiled down to those brief values I've already mentioned; love everyone, share your belongings, don't take more than you need at the expense of others, heal the sick, care for the poor, practice nonviolent civil disobedience, work for justice and equality, and forgive those who have wronged you.

But so far I've only spoken about the Christianity of Unitarian Universalism, not the Unitarian Universalism of Jesus, which is really what this talk is about. I do believe, based upon my best educated guess, that the historical Jesus was Unitarian and Universalist in his life and teachings. Incidentally, you may notice that I refer to him only as Jesus and not as Christ or Jesus Christ. This is so for a couple of reasons. Foremost, because I do not personally consider him my savior or savior of the world. More importantly, however, is that scholars make a distinction between the historical Jesus and the mythical Christ of faith, and formally refer to the historical person as Jesus and the mythical person as Christ. Since I don't believe he was the Christ, but do believe he was a real person, I refer to him always simply as Jesus.

Now, why do I think it reasonable to assert that Jesus was both a Unitarian and a Universalist? To me the answer is obvious. As a Jew he would have been Unitarian in his theology, believing, that is, in only one God. His life and teachings, furthermore, present someone who extraordinarily inclusive of others, especially those his society condemned as unclean and untouchable, outcasts and sinners, making him someone who demonstrated the unconditional love of the one god he believed in. In short, Jesus was Unitarian in his theology and Universalist in his behavior.

Of course there are many Christians who would disagree by pointing out the few reports of Jesus declaring himself to be the same as God. In John 10:30, for instance, Jesus is reported to have said, “I and the Father are one,” at which point the Jews present are said to have “picked up stones to stone him,” suggesting Jesus actually renounced his Jewish Unitarianism by considering himself a member of the godhead. They are also very fond of the saying, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>1</sup> And, of course, there is the grandiose prologue to the 4<sup>th</sup> gospel, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”<sup>2</sup> Yet it should be understood that all of these verses are found exclusively in the Gospel of John, the newest of the four gospels, written well into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, sometime after Jesus’ death and his original followers were all deceased. Although it borrows some of the stories and sayings from the earlier gospels, sayings like these are not part of the genuine oral tradition but were made up by the author to support the 4<sup>th</sup> gospel’s high Christology. John is more about the Christ of faith than Jesus the man. In short, Jesus simply never said these things.

So we must turn to the earlier gospels, especially to the commonalities between the first three, also called the synoptic gospels, to help us determine some of his authentic sayings and teachings. Because some of them are found in only two of the three, in Mark and Matthew, for example, but not Luke, or in Luke and Mark but not Matthew, or in Mark and Luke, but not Matthew, some scholars believe there may have once been another source all three borrowed from that only contained a list of his original sayings. Scholars call this lost source, Q. Sayings like, “turn the other cheek,” “Blessed are the poor,” “Go the second mile,” “Love your enemies,” “Give to one who asks,” and his parables of the *Good Samaritan*, the *Mustard Seed*, and the *Labors in the Vineyard*, are among the few teachings believed to have authentically originated with him.

Although he was Jewish, and, thus, would have had a Unitarian theology, these sort of authentic sayings would indicate Jesus wasn’t very preachy. In other words, he didn’t actually say much about God, other than to persuade his followers to help establish a heavenly life on Earth by practicing godly values—turning the other cheek, caring for the poor and needy, going the second mile, loving your neighbor as yourself, forgiving your enemies, and so on. After his untimely death, his followers, at least for a short while, formed communes and attempted to practice these teachings among themselves. During the first few decades after his execution, they didn’t seem hung up on a particular belief about God either. They simply shared all that they had with each other and treated everyone as an equal, regardless of race, class, or gender. “There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus never actually said, “God is Love,” but this is precisely how the Gospel of John retrospectively summarizes his theology, something I believe it gets right. It’s a simple sentence, but it’s a profound theology, for it suggests God isn’t a person, but a kind of relationship that exists between us when we love everyone, share our belongings, don’t take

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:6

<sup>2</sup> John 1:1

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:28

more than we need at the expense of others, heal the sick, care for the poor, practice nonviolent civil disobedience, work for justice and equality, and forgive those who have wronged us.

Jesus first followers, and I hesitate to call them Christians, were, like him, Jews, who also would have held a Unitarian theology, the belief in one god, and would never have committed the sin of idolatry by worshipping a human being. It was only through the Greek apostle Paul's exploitation of Jesus' popularity after his martyrdom, and his appeal to a gentile audience, that Jesus' Jewish sect was marginalized and overwhelmed by the fast emergence of Hellenistic Christianity. This began happening within just a few years of his death, but the emphasis upon his humanity lingered well into the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Christianity became the official Roman religion, the Trinity was invented, and it became illegal to think or say otherwise. At the time there was actually a Christian theologian named Arius who forcefully argued in favor of his human origins, prompting the formation of the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, which responded with the creed that is repeated to this day declaring that Jesus and God are one and the same.

The point not to be missed here is that Unitarianism preceded Trinitarianism, which emerged only as a peculiar attempt to explain how it is possible to worship Jesus while still believing in one god without committing idolatry. Likewise, as some of you have heard me emphasize before, Christianity's first systematic theologian, Origen of Alexandria, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian, was a Universalist because he couldn't accept that a loving god would condemn anyone to eternal damnation. It wasn't until three centuries later that the Church posthumously declared his teachings anathema. So you see, Unitarianism and Universalism, reflected the theology of Jesus, his original followers, and remained the beliefs of at least some of his followers several centuries after his death.

Although these beliefs became illegal and punishable by death, they reemerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century after the invention of the printing press made the Bible accessible to theologians like Michael Servetus who discovered no mention of the Trinity in it. This discovery got him burned at the stake, a fire that, nevertheless, sparked the rebirth of Unitarianism in Eastern Europe, which, again, began emphasizing the humanity of Jesus and actually following his practical teachings. One of Servetus' contemporaries, the Italian theologian, Faustus Socinus founded a heretical branch of Christianity that rejected the Trinity, Jesus' divinity, and taught that salvation comes not by worshipping him, but by putting his teachings into practice.

So, as you can see, Unitarianism and Universalism originated with Jesus himself, and have remained with us, even if only underground, ever since. While mainstream Christianity has continued to embrace the Trinity and eternal Hell, we have continued to emphasize Jesus' humanity and his humanitarian teachings. It has gotten to the point that, here in the U.S., we have rid ourselves of the compulsion to emphasize Jesus at all, but we continue to focus on the values he advocated two millennia ago, to love everyone, share our belongings, don't take more than we need at the expense of others, heal the sick, care for the poor, practice nonviolent civil disobedience, work for justice and equality, and forgive those who have wronged us.

## Jesus

It was, thus, inevitable that Humanism would emerge from Unitarianism, which it did in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, right here in our own church, where the father of Religious Humanism, a signer of the original *Humanist Manifesto*, Rev. John Dietrich, our minister between 1911 and 1916, first declared himself a humanist. We no longer need to mention Jesus, or trace our origins to him, because we prefer to emphasize the importance of our actions today and making the future more just for everyone. Today we call it “human agency,” the importance of putting our faith into action, of translating our beliefs into behavior. 2000 years ago, Jesus called it creating Heaven on Earth, and taught us that God is among us whenever we love one another. So long as we can put our arms around our neighbors and walk together side-by-side, whether we are Trinitarian or Unitarian, Christian or Humanist, secular or religious, white American or Native American, we truly are following the man from Nazareth.