

## Was Jesus a Humanist?

By

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Was Jesus a Humanist? To answer this, it would be prudent to first discuss what I mean by *humanism*. To do so, it's additionally important to recognize the difference between humanism with a small "h" and Humanism with a capital "H." These days we tend to associate the word with a particular philosophy originating in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, solidifying with the adoption of the *Humanist Manifesto* in 1933. Formal Humanism, the kind with a capital "H," began here in our church, when John H. Dietrich, our minister between 1911 and 1916, was reading an article on Auguste Comte's philosophy of Positivism, which Dietrich "loosely defined as the religion of humanity,"<sup>1</sup> but the article's author had shortened to just "humanism," with a small "h." It was then, according to his biographer, Dietrich realized, "This age honored word, this 'humanism' would be a good name for his interpretation of religion in contrast to theism."<sup>2</sup> This didn't mean Dietrich was an atheist, only that he believed religion ought to be focused on human welfare, not supernatural beliefs. He went on to become known as the Father of Religious Humanism, was an original signer of the *Humanist Manifesto*, and established the Humanist Pulpit at the First Unitarian Society in Minneapolis after leaving Spokane. Secular Humanism also emerged as part of this same movement.

But humanism with a small "h," the kind that influenced Comte's thinking to begin with, emerged during the Renaissance period between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, in reference to the renewed appreciation of the much earlier thinking of classic Greek and Roman philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Democritus, and Epicurus, but summarized in the words of Protagoras, "Man is the measure of all things." This may not sound so heretical now, but in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when Protagoras made this controversial statement, people generally believed what happened in the world, including the societies they lived in and the events of their own lives, was up to the Fates and the gods, and was, thus, beyond human influence. The notion that human beings were a deciding factor in the direction of their lives and could influence the world around them was radical and sparked a debate we have, in many ways, been arguing ever since.

However, it wasn't just their novel way of thinking about humanity that attracted the Renaissance thinkers to classical philosophers, but also their method of thinking itself. The notion of basing our ideas on reason and empirical facts was also considered an important part of humanism with a small "h." Our small "h" humanistic church expressed this mindset in its founding bylaws established in 1888, 55 years before formal Humanism existed, with

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<sup>1</sup> Winston, Carleton, *The Circle of Earth: The Story of John H. Dietrich*, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, NY, 1942, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

the statement I oft enjoy reciting, “The authority of its belief is reason, the method of finding its beliefs is scientific. Its aim is to crush superstition and establish facts of religion.”<sup>3</sup> This same sentiment was later expressed in formal, capital “H” Humanism in the *Manifesto*, which states;

Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Obviously humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered, but it does insist that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.

So these are the qualities both formal and informal humanism share in common, a belief in the *humanistic ethic*, meaning that which we ought to focus our moral efforts on is human growth and wellbeing; *human agency*, meaning it’s up to us to shape our world and communities toward this end; and a devotion to seeking truth and knowledge through objective *reason* and *empirical evidence*. As one online dictionary more succinctly says, “Humanism is a philosophical and ethical stance that emphasizes the value and agency of human beings, individually and collectively, and generally prefers critical thinking and evidence over acceptance of dogma or superstition.”

So, to answer the question at hand—*Was Jesus a humanist?*—we must conclude, if he was, he had to have been a humanist with a small “h,” since he lived and died long before the emergence of formal Humanism. So the real question is whether his life and teachings demonstrate his belief in and commitment to human welfare, human agency, and some degree of reason or, at least, empirical reality?

And how do we go about answering this when there are four different Gospel accounts that often contradict each other and portray him in very different ways? In general, the earlier a particular Gospel was written, the more human Jesus is portrayed. Conversely, the later they were written, the more divine he’s depicted. The earliest account, the *Gospel of Mark*, for example, written around 65 CE, begins with Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist. Upon emerging from the waters, he realizes he’s a child of God. This is what scholars call an *adoptionistic Christology*. It’s a very low Christology because Jesus is just an ordinary person who has a profound religious experience. Likewise, at the end of *Mark*, after Jesus’s death, the story ends with some of his followers discovering his empty tomb. There isn’t a resurrection account in it, and it doesn’t mention any Jesus sightings. It’s just a creative way to conclude an otherwise tragic ending with a little mystery and hope.

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<sup>3</sup> McDowell, Esther, *Unitarians in the State of Washington*, Frank McCaffrey Publishers, 1966. p. 97.

In the next account, the *Gospel of Matthew*, written around 85 CE, Jesus's story begins with his human birth from Mary, a descendent of King David, and ends with some of his followers encountering the risen Jesus who promises to remain with them "to the very end of the age." In this story, nobody actually makes physical contact with Jesus and his continued presence implies only that he will remain with them in spirit. By the time the *Gospel of Luke* is written around 90 CE, Jesus's story begins earlier still, with his conception, and ends with a physical resurrection, as proven by risen Jesus eating and interacting with his followers, and an ascension story, explaining why, if his resurrection wasn't merely spiritual, he's not still present on Earth. Finally, when we get to the *Gospel of John*, written in the early part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, Jesus becomes Christ, not as an adult, not at his birth, not as his conception, but before the creation of everything. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In *John*, there's no doubt Jesus's resurrection is physical, given that he eats and drinks with his followers and allows them to feel the scars of his crucifixion and torture.

We can see from these, as the story of Jesus evolved over time, the more literal it was taken, going from the hint of a resurrection as a literary device, to the eventual belief in a physical historical resurrection, and from being the story of a human being who began a religious movement, to the story of one who was "with God, and was God." That's called a high Christology because Jesus is viewed as a divinity.

I bring all of this up to point out that if we're going to answer any questions about Jesus, whether he was a humanist or anything else, we have to first decide which Jesus we're talking about, human Jesus or the divine Christ? Historical Jesus or the Christ of Faith? The subversive religious teacher who was executed by the Roman government and religious authorities, or the God who existed before time, became incarnate, died, and was miraculously resurrected to redeem all of humanity? Do we accept the human stories of Jesus or the supernatural stories about him?

I suspect there are far more people in the world to this day who believe in the supernatural stories than not, but I think it's more reasonable to believe Jesus was an ordinary human being whose story, through time, became obscured by mythology and fiction. Our Unitarian tradition is epitomized by this humanistic idea of Jesus. The very word, *Unitarian*, refers to an original monotheistic belief in only one god. Since Jesus was not God, he, like everyone else, had to be a human being, extraordinary as he may have been.

After Rome was Christianized and Christianity was Hellenized, however, it was perfectly acceptable to believe in many gods and to worship humans as gods. This led to the doctrine of the Trinity in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, and to the outlawing of Unitarianism (the belief in Jesus's humanity). But when the Unitarian idea was reawakened after the invention of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, it's proponents immediately began questioning the divinity of Jesus again. It's official founder, Michael Servetus was burned alive in 1553 for writing a book, *On*

*the Errors of the Trinity*, and the Unitarian Bishop of Transylvania, Ferenc Dávid was condemned for claiming it makes about as much sense for Protestants to pray to Jesus as for Catholics to pray to Mary. Many others came to share this humanistic Christology, believing that Jesus was an admirable man, but a man, nonetheless. Faustus Socinus, for example, a contemporary and friend of Dávid, taught salvation doesn't come from Jesus' death but by putting his humanitarian teachings into practice. He also rejected the idea of original sin and human depravity.

Although American Unitarianism emerged independently from Eastern European Unitarianism, it did so for many of the same reasons, rejecting the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of Original Sin, while, conversely, embracing his humanity and human agency and goodness. American Unitarians, like Rev. Charles Chauncy, minister of Boston's First Church in the larger part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, argued that instead of needing to be born again, human beings are born "with the capacity for both sin and righteousness,"<sup>4</sup> which is a major departure from tradition. It suggests there's something innately good about us to begin with. A hundred years later, the Unitarian minister John Haynes Holmes began preaching religion should concentrate on human welfare and agency, not upon "the supernatural and the miraculous."<sup>5</sup> In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Universalist General Convention adopted a declaration rejecting the idea of "inherent depravity," that also claimed, "mankind is led into sin by evil surroundings, by the evils of unjust social and economic systems."<sup>6</sup> And, of course, you've already heard me talk about the importance of Rev. John Dietrich to the birth of formal Humanism a few years later.

So, being Unitarians, it seems likely we would side with a humanistic interpretation of Jesus. Still, being human doesn't make one a humanist. Sadly, there are many who are not, including many Unitarian these days. So how then do we begin to answer the question, was he a humanist? We could turn to his teachings, but we end up with the same problem we have with Jesus himself, which teachings do we accept as authentic?

According to the Jesus Seminar, comprised of hundreds of scholars whom, after years of research, voted to determine the historical reliability of the many claims about him, 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 they believe *may* have happened, or, at least, may contain some small kernel of historical truth. Many believe the few statements about him that may have happened were originally sayings or stories passed down through oral tradition. The Gospel writers recorded some of these traditions in their embellished

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<sup>4</sup> Robinson, David, *The Unitarians and the Universalists*, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1985, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

narratives. So, at best, the Gospels probably contain a few original authentic Jesus sayings embedded in lots of made up stories about him.

So, with all this in mind, we must look toward common themes and short sayings in the Gospels that may get at the heart of the historical Jesus. Yet, it doesn't take much to recognize Jesus's teachings are largely concerned with human welfare. I personally believe, as a Jewish person living under Roman tyranny, Jesus knew what it meant to be oppressed. If, as the stories suggest, he was fatherless, a *mamzer*, as his Jewish society considered him, he was also oppressed and outcast by his own Jewish community. So the transformative religious experience he had upon his baptism, realizing he is a child of God and that God is pleased with him, led him to publicly claim, despite his low social status, he is both a son of God, meaning he is worthy of compassion, and a son of Man, meaning he is a human being and, thus, worthy of the same respect as everyone else. This was the good news he preached and taught everywhere he went, especially to those who were most oppressed, ostracized, and demonized by society.

We see this repeated in the many stories of Jesus being criticized for eating and publicly associating with those the authorities and culture considered unclean and unworthy—the outcasts, sinners, foreigners, women, traitors, and anyone else who had been dehumanized. You see, Jesus didn't literally cast out demons, he only cast off the demonization of others by treating them with compassion and respect. In *Mark*, the earliest of the Gospels, to give just one example, "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Jesus was indignant. He reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed."<sup>7</sup> It's an extraordinary account because being a leper epitomizes what it meant to be considered socially and spiritually unclean in Jesus's society. Yet he heals the man by touching him. That's what healed him, not supernatural magic, just being touched, included, welcomed into society.

The very next story in *Mark* tells similarly of a man who had been paralyzed, symbolic, perhaps, of one who had been so beaten down by his oppressive society that he had no more moves. He had no standing. He couldn't find work, he couldn't associate with others, he had nothing. Jesus heals him by saying, "Your sins are forgiven... Get up, pick up your mat and walk."<sup>8</sup> This, to me, is not the story of a literal healing, but a metaphor of restoring a person's dignity, of treating a human being as a human being, as an upstanding member of the community. That's how we heal society, and it's a humanistic approach.

In the very same chapter, Jesus is criticized for encouraging his hungry followers to pick grain to eat on the Sabbath. "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath," he

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 1:40-42

<sup>8</sup> Mark 2:9

responded, “So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.”<sup>9</sup> If my interpretation of “Son of Man,” is correct, this is like saying, “rules are made to benefit human welfare, humans don’t exist to benefit the rules. Human welfare is more important than the rules.”

In this earliest of the Gospel accounts, while Jesus is healing another demonized person, and is himself accused of “being out of his mind” and the “prince of demons,” by the angry religious authorities, he’s told his family is waiting for him outside, presumably to talk some sense into him before he gets into serious trouble. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked.” (Notice he doesn’t say, “father,” because he doesn’t have a human father in the Markan account.) “Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! <sup>35</sup>Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.’”<sup>10</sup> And the will of God is to heal one another by loving one another. This story also indicates that Jesus recognized our common humanity, that all human beings are part of one family, another humanistic value.

As the *Gospel of Mark* continues, it includes a story of Jesus healing a woman who had been considered perpetually unclean by, once again, making public contact with her and praising her for her strong faith. Strong in faith, not spiritually unclean! It includes stories of him healing the sick, and feeding the hungry, educating children, and of healing those whose hearts had been hardened and were unable to see or hear others as human beings, as well as restoring the voices of those who could not speak, those who had been silenced, and stories of throngs of other hurting people wanting to touch him and be touched by him.

He may not have known Aristotelian logic, but Jesus was an empiricist in as much as he concentrated on the real-world suffering of those around him, not on supernatural ideas that could have distanced him from the suffering of others. Rather than waiting to go to Heaven, he sought to establish Heaven on Earth. When asked how he summed up his religious beliefs, he said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” But how exactly do we put this into practice? By “Loving your neighbor as yourself,” he said, a humanistic response.

Stories like these abound in all the Gospels. Whether they are historically accurate or not, they seem abundant enough of them to get at the heart of who Jesus was, a man with a human heart that prioritized human welfare and human agency in order to deal with the difficult realities too many humans face. Though I no longer consider myself a Christian in the traditional sense, as a humanist, I hope I can follow his example by treating everyone, even my enemies, as dignified members of my human family, by welcoming those who have been demonized, uplifting those who have been beaten down, working toward a society that feeds the poor, heals the sick, and educates its children, and that is touched by the suffering of others, and reaches out to touch them back and make them whole.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 2:27

<sup>10</sup> Mark 3:34