

Answering Deacon's Questions about Unitarianism

By

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A Gonzaga University student named Deacon recently visited one of our Sunday services to learn about Unitarian Universalism for his Christian diversity class. Some of you may recall speaking with this young man during our social hour. He later followed up with an email to me asking six questions, none of which was "What do Unitarians believe about ... ?", the usual question I get about our peculiar religion. This suggests that Deacon had learned enough about us during his visit to ask the right questions.

I answered them as succinctly as I could but also realized we can all benefit from considering them in more depth ourselves. Our tiny religion, historic as it is, has become a little-known quantity in today's world, including within our own congregations, which is why I frequently speak about Unitarianism and its inspiring history. Knowing where we come from helps us better understand who we are and what we ought to be about.

Here are Deacon's questions.

1. How would you describe the role of Jesus within Unitarian Universalism?
2. Does your congregation view UU as part of the Christian tradition, or as something broader?
3. What role do sacred texts (such as the Bible or the Torah) play in your services and teachings?
4. Since UU doesn't emphasize traditional sacraments, how do you understand the role of rituals such as chalice lighting, the water ceremony, or the fire ceremony?
5. How does your congregation balance individual freedom of belief with a shared sense of community identity?
6. How would you describe the theological diversity within your congregation?

As I said, these are thoughtful questions. But, given the noncreedal heart of our free religion, I imagine many of us would answer them a little to a lot differently. There are so many ways to begin and so many directions each question could take and even lead to an entire sermon itself. But this morning I will simply expand upon my answers to Deacon, with the acknowledgement that my responses are not final, that I could respond differently on any given day, that other Unitarians, including ministers, might respond another way, and that none of our answers would necessarily be wrong, just incomplete.

With that disclaimer, before responding to Deacon's questions myself, I thought it would be helpful to offer him some brief context about our religion.

"One important piece of information," I said;

Unitarianism and Universalism are two different unorthodox denominations of Christianity that formed an association, the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961. That Association is in trouble today due to its divergence into "Wokeism" and away from both denomination's historic liberal roots. Unitarianism is the original Christian belief that Jesus was only human. The belief that he and "the Father" are one was born in the 4th century CE with the Nicene Creed to undermine this original, centuries old belief after Christianity was usurped by Constantine and Romanized. The "Holy Spirit" wasn't added to the Nicene idea of the Father and the Son being of "one substance" until the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE, which additionally made it illegal for believers to utter the original Unitarian theology and Christology. The first systematic Christian theologian, Origen of Alexandria (185 CE - 253 CE), furthermore, was a Universalist because he did not believe in eternal Hell, the defining belief of Universalism.

My point in providing this background was that as different and divergent as our liberal religion may seem today when compared to mainstream Christianity, I consider it important to understand that Roman Catholicism and all the mainstream version of Christianity that have branched off it over the past sixteen centuries are the true outliers, not us Unitarians and Universalists. Our beliefs are rooted in the original ideas of the earliest Christians.

Understanding this, puts us in a good place to consider Deacon's first question: *How would you describe the role of Jesus within Unitarian Universalism?*

This may be the most complicated of the questions to answer, so I'll spend a little more time on it than some of the rest. In Western Unitarianism in particular, what one believes or disbelieves about Jesus or any religious figure is up to the individual. Therefore, we have no definitive beliefs about him. I imagine few among us consider him a god, although many, to lesser or greater degrees, might look upon him as a wise man with valuable teachings. Many, if not most Unitarians, go about our everyday lives without giving much thought to Jesus. As a whole, he holds no special significance for us.

But this is different for our Eastern European Unitarian counterparts. They still hold great reverence for Jesus. Although they are defined by their disbelief in the Trinity, they consider him to have been human, not God. Their most common Hungarian blessing, *Egy az Isten*, means, "God is One," and is one they say often to each other and repeat at every religious service. Their Sunday services include hymns praising God, readings from the Bible, and sermons that treat Jesus with great reverence. They simply don't consider him the same as God. Still, it's likely that many Eastern European Unitarians, where Unitarianism was

formalized in the 16th century, would feel more at home in almost any Christian church in America that they would at one of our Unitarian churches.

Western Unitarianism is not a direct outgrowth of Eastern European Unitarianism. It is not the product of missionaries who travelled here from there. Our brand of Unitarianism is an outgrowth of the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries and its emphasis on human dignity, human rights, human welfare, human agency, and human progress, all of which depend upon a belief in human goodness. But human goodness was contrary to the anti-human doctrine of Original Sin and total human depravity that had been ingrained with the Christian and, thus, the European psyche for centuries.

The Enlightenment thinkers, including many of the so-called Founding Fathers of our democracy, began arguing that human beings are born with the capacity for good as well as evil. They initially referred to themselves as Arminians, based on the anti-Calvinist teachings of the 16th Century Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius who argued that humans are not predestined to sin. It was only later that they came to refer to their pro-human ideas as Unitarianism instead; not because they emphasized *Egy az Isten*, "God is One," but because they were more comfortable focusing on Jesus' humanity and humanitarian teachings.

But, as John Dietrich, our famous former minister, said in his 1926 sermon, *Who Are These Unitarians?*, "the name is very inadequate to express the idea of the Unitarian movement ... they were Unitarians and rejected the dogma of the Trinity because they were liberals and placed themselves under the command of reason and accepted the modern discoveries of science and history. Their disbelief in the Trinitarian formula was merely incidental to their attitude toward all problems of the time."¹

It was in the early part of the 20th century, during the Humanist Debate, sparked by John Dietrich, that some argued we ought to stop paying homage to Jesus as the most enlightened person ever born, and give ourselves fully to the findings of reason and science. As Dietrich said in his 1924 sermon, *The Terrible Choice*;

Let me remind you of a few facts ... Jesus was not an educated man: he was not a graduate of any school or college or university. He had no business or political experience. He never traveled for study or observation; probably never having been over fifty miles from his isolated home. He was not surrounded with men of culture or extensive knowledge; His only associates being rough country fishermen. He never met the great minds or leaders of the day, who lived in Rome and Greece. He stayed in the ranks of the rear guard of humanity. He led the life of a hermit, with "no place where to lay his head." He lived in all probability on charity. He was never married nor had children; and he died at the age of thirty. How could

so young and so untutored and so inexperienced a man, unless he was god, be accepted as "the greatest teacher the world has ever seen?"²

So, though rooted in Christianity, ours can hardly be considered a Christian religion today since Jesus—Christ, if you prefer—no longer has any central or formal place in our lives and beliefs, at least not as a whole.

But Unitarianism has always been as much about its belief in the humanity of Jesus as it has been about the belief in one God, maybe even more so. Unitarians were, after all, Christians, making his humanitarian and communitarian teachings central to their theological beliefs and practices. Like his earliest followers, they did not worship him as a god, but learned, through him, that all people, especially the most outcast and demonized among us, must also be counted among and treated as children of God. It was, thus, inevitable that formal humanism would eventually be born from this humanistic Christology; which it was, right here in Spokane.

As I said, this question was the most complicated because answering it requires understanding our long history. But this should make responding to the rest much simpler, especially number two: *Does your congregation view UU as part of the Christian tradition, or as something broader?*

This one has just about been answered with the first. But to be precise, yes, at present, after centuries of broadening our perspective, we see ourselves as being historically rooted in the Christian tradition but are now, not only broader, but beyond the Christian tradition.

That said, there are a few caveats to go over. Firstly, there are some among us who identify as Christian, just as there are some who identify as Buddhist or Pagan or something else. This is their right and something we embrace and support precisely because we are Unitarians; because, that is, we are devoted to freedom of thought.

Secondly, as I said earlier, the earliest Christians were unitarian, small "u," inasmuch as they viewed Jesus as a wise teacher, but nothing more than a human being. This remains how we view Jesus to this day, as a historical figure who lived a good and noble life advocating for the dignity of all people, especially of those who need it most; and he was publicly executed because his teachings threatened the power and economic structures of his day. If a religion had emerged around his good news that all people are the sons and daughters of God, not just one person, there may have been no need for Unitarianism ever to have emerged.

Thirdly, without going into depth, Unitarianism emerged in parallel with the Protestant Reformation and is an outgrowth of the Anabaptist movement that was brutally persecuted

out of existence by the Reformers. The Anabaptists believed so deeply in individual autonomy that they rejected the legitimacy of infant baptism and re-baptized adults who chose the religion of their own free will. Hence the name, Anabaptist, meaning, "to baptize again." It was from these Baptize-Againers that we inherited church autonomy and polity and the exclusive right of our congregations to ordain, call, and dismiss our ministers.

With these few qualifications in mind, it is also fair to say that, yes, we are part of the Christian tradition in its original, most ancient, and most profound sense, and that we have not strayed as far beyond it as have most other denominations.

Moving on to question number three: *What role do sacred texts (Such as the Bible or the Torah) play in your services and teachings?*

Here is my brief response to Deacon:

Unitarianism formally emerged during the Renaissance, and with it, the *Studia humanitatus*, the belief in mining all the writings of humanity, written by all people in all places and ages, for wisdom and knowledge. This is our practice today. No book is sacred to us and none taboo. They become worth something to us only if we find them truthful and meaningful.

That's pretty succinct. I'm often asked by those who can't understand our religion, "If you don't preach from the Bible, what do you talk about?" To me the answer to the question should be self-evident: We are free to explore far more wisdom than is espoused from the Christian pulpit, precisely because we are willing to find truth, meaning, and understanding from anywhere it might lie—from the holy books of all major religions, and from those that the major religions have discarded, banned, and burned. We find them in poetry, science, and history. Our libraries, the internet, and now AI contain more sources of inspiration than any of us could ever possibly fill our minds and hearts with. No book is sacred and none is taboo, which is why we can never run out of subjects to ponder and be inspired by.

Question number four: *Since UU doesn't emphasize traditional sacraments, how do you understand the role of rituals such as chalice lighting, the water ceremony, or the fire ceremony?*

When I was interviewing for my position here, someone from the Worship team asked if I intended to change the rituals in the familiar order of service. My response was, "I don't care what rituals you have as long as you have rituals." The word *ritual* shares the same root as the words *rite*, *rut*, and *routine*. As creatures of habit, like all creatures, our lives abound with routines, including a few ruts we can't get out of. We repeat most of them every day.

We wake up at the usual time, get ready for the day in the usual way, follow the routes we always do, and usually go about the day much like the day before.

There's nothing wrong with that. That's how life and evolution work. We only change our habits when something in the environment requires us to adapt. But occasionally, we need to remind ourselves that there is more to life than the security of our familiar patterns and paradigms. That's why we break the weekly routine by going to church, so that we can engage in other rituals that remind us there are additional matters we ought to consider and be about, even if they require us to step out of our comfort zones.

I'm personally not much on the annual ritual services Deacon mentioned, but I do like our weekly order of service. Just image how you would feel if sudden and permanent changes were made to it, like changing our closing song? Whatever our rituals mean to you, they are meant to remind you that when you leave this place there are important matters to attend to in your life and the world that go beyond your usual ruts and routines. And that's why you come here. That's the kind of person you are. Someone who thinks about a lot more than just yourself. And you need to be in a place and with others that remind you that you are more than your daily habits and routines.

Number five: *How does your congregation balance individual freedom of belief with a shared sense of community identity?*

Most communities are defined by what their members share in common. "Common" is the root of "community." The opposite of community is the individual. Communities may share the same ideas, values, behaviors, and even physical qualities. Within them, every individual is expected to embody that which the group holds in common, or else.

Unitarianism is different because the one thing that holds our communities together is our reverence for the individual; for one's freedom to think, and speak, and choose their own path. Our kind of community is a paradox. We commune around our devotion to the individual.

Even so, we still have issues from time to time with those individuals whose individuality upsets the equilibrium we all want in our lives and relationships. As I often joke, Unitarians seldom argue of over philosophical, or theological, or even political ideas; just don't try to move the furniture. So, we're not perfect, but, in general, the fact that we're not hung up on what others think or believe places us a few steps ahead of many communities when it comes to finding balance in the common human struggle between freedom and belonging; between society and the individual.

Now for Deacon's final question: *How would you describe the theological diversity within your congregation?*

It's unusual compared to most religions, but entirely normal among Unitarians. Rather than saying more myself, I'll respond with something the renowned Unitarian Universalist minister, Jack Mendelsohn wrote in 1964, "In a Unitarian Universalist congregation, an agnostic may sit beside one who believes in a personal God; at the after-service coffee hour a believer in reincarnation may stand chatting with one who affirms 'utter extinction.' Such are our diversities of theological belief."³

For me this is a valuable insight. Mendelsohn's point isn't that we are diverse, but that we enjoy each other's company with no thought of our differences. Being of the same mind is not an issue for us, so long as we are respectful and tolerant of one another. As Mendelsohn also said, "The most fundamental of all Unitarian Universalist principles, then, is personal freedom of religious belief—the principle of the free mind ... No Holy Writ dictates. No creed dictates what must be believed."⁴

Like many who enter our sanctuary, Deacon came to us with questions, the kind of questions that deserve more than just a grade. Perhaps he learned that us Unitarians are lot better at questioning answers than we are at answering questions. But as long as people like him keep showing up with honest questions, and we keep offering them a cup of coffee and a conversation instead of a creed, maybe they'll discover that the answers don't matter so much after all.

¹ Dietrich, John H., "Who Are These Unitarians?" First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, October 19, 1926

² Dietrich, John H., "The Terrible Choice: The Philosophy of Either-Or," First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, March 17, 2024.

³ Mendelsohn, Jack, *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age*, Skinner House Books, Boston, MA, 1964, 1995, p. 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39.