

Progressive Christianity: Oxymoron or Unitarian?

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Many present day Unitarians have a negative view of Christianity, some for good reasons. They have experienced or were a victim of one of its toxic versions. Others formed their opinions from the side-lines. Media accounts that lumped all Christians together, reported on Christian adherence to patriarchy, opposition to a woman's right to choose, intolerance of other religious faiths, condemnation of the LGBTQ community, belief in creationism, and reliance on the Bible as the literal word of God, to mention but a few. Such coverage is not conducive to a positive picture of Christianity in the mind's eye of your average Unitarian. As Christianity is the dominant religion in western culture, its many present and historical abuses and hypocrisies have not escaped our notice or enhanced its image.

I was very aware of these attitudes when I worked for a large Unitarian Universalist congregation in Sacramento as the administrator. In that role I developed a close relationship with the congregation's treasurer and his wife. Pete and Velma became good friends. Over a glass of wine on many an evening they told me wonderful stories about New Zealand, which they visited regularly for extended periods in order to play every golf course from Invercargill to Cape Reinga. Sadly, Velma took ill and died. They were both life long UU Humanists, so the congregation was surprised when Pete asked me, an Episcopal priest, to do her funeral. I carefully crafted the service to respect their spiritual views. Because of their wider involvement in the community through extensive volunteer work there was a large and diverse number of mourners. After the service, the matriarch of the congregation, an imposing woman and a staunch atheist, came storming across the room towards me. Fearing the worst, I braced myself. When she reached me her usually rather stern face broke into a big grin as she told me, "I was sceptical about you doing this service, but that was the best UU funeral I've ever attended." Before I had a chance to savour my relief, a friend of the treasurer who I knew belonged to a conservative Christian church approached me to say, "It was not what I was expecting. It was a very Christian service."

So how could the two statements possibly both be true? It's certainly not because I have magical powers. They are true because, except for the last 54 years, both Unitarians and the Universalists identified as Christian. And even now one of our six sources of spirituality that we affirm and promote is Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Our very names set us apart from other Christians, but for all those years we were Christians all the same. Unitarians got their name for rejecting the pre-existence of Christ and the divinity of Jesus established at the Council of Nicea in 325, distinguishing us from Trinitarians. Universalists set themselves apart from other Christians by believing God saved everyone as opposed to the Calvinist view of only the predestined elect making it to heaven. They both rejected Augustine's view of original sin and Anselm's theory of substitutionary atonement—that Christ died for us on the cross. If you are still not convinced about our Christian roots, look at the windows in our church or meetinghouse, if you prefer. See the pale cross patterns and then look at the chalice symbol representing Unitarian Universalism in the banner up front. It is not coincidental that the shape of the chalice suggests a cross.

Certainly we could be forgiven for forgetting our Christian roots. Other Christians were happy to condemn us as heretics. Did you know the word heretic simply means, "able to choose." Other Christians, not having the option to choose what they believed, were perhaps miffed and treated us rather poorly over the centuries.

A Spanish physician, Michael Servetus, studied the Bible and concluded that the concept of the Trinity, as traditionally conceived, was not biblical. His books on the subject caused much uproar. Servetus naively went to Geneva in 1553 to discuss with John Calvin their

differences. Calvin's idea of dialogue was to arrest him, convict him of heresy, and burn him at the stake.

In Britain, Unitarianism was seen as heresy and specifically forbidden by parliament's Toleration Act of 1689. Unitarianism was the last of the nonconformist denominations to be made legal in 1813. As a result several early radical reformers who professed Unitarian beliefs in the 16th and 17th centuries suffered imprisonment and martyrdom. John Biddle, considered the father of English Unitarianism, was repeatedly imprisoned for his writing against the Trinity before being exiled by Oliver Cromwell. When finally brought home he was shortly thereafter imprisoned again where he took ill and died in 1662.

Joseph Priestley, theologian, natural philosopher, educator, chemist, dissenting clergyman, left-leaning political theorist and the one credited with discovering oxygen, became a proponent of Unitarianism when his friend Theophilus Lindsey held the first Unitarian service at the Essex Street Chapel in London on 17 April 1774. Later he would found his own Unitarian congregation but when a "King and Country" mob burned his church and home, he fled to America with his family.

But all that bad blood between Trinitarian Christians and us did not sour us on Jesus and the Gospels. We just looked at them rationally. We embraced the historical-critical scholarship out of Germany. We reject miracles and Jesus may be just a man, but he is worthy of emulation. Darwinism did not put us back on our heels. We had no problem with reason and religion coexisting. We were tolerant of other religions, less so if they were burning us at the stake. We certainly found no Gospel support for slavery, so we were active in the Abolition movement in America and in opposing the slave trade in England. We supported the LGBTQ community and ordained the first openly gay minister and were the first sect to support same-sex marriage. Early on we thought women should have all the legal rights of men and be eligible for ordination. We considered the Gospels a radical call for social and economic justice. We did not believe creeds were an avenue to faith but an impediment to inclusion. "Deeds not creeds" was our clarion call. In other words, Unitarians were the first progressive Christians.

For Christians held within the embrace of orthodoxy, the road to Progressive Christianity took longer. The slippery slope from orthodoxy to heterodoxy—opinions at variance with the church doctrinal stance--began in the 18th century with the search for the historical Jesus.

Imagine a world where the church and its interpretation of the Bible as the Word of God decided everything. Where discovering something contrary to the Bible, like the tooth of Tyrannosaurus Rex in a Welsh coal mine, could put you in physical danger if you made public your find that contradicted Genesis. Imagine if you were a woman who, if you challenged biblical injunctions, could be proclaimed a witch and legally burned or drowned. Imagine a world that you could not publish anything that may be contrary to church doctrine without serious consequences. Imagine a world where all civil law was based on the Bible for the citizens of Augustine's City of God. Imagine a world where the church totally controlled public discourse.

This was the world of the 18th century. The search for the historical Jesus was the leverage to begin to break this control. So the first step of seeking the historical Jesus was to beat back religious oppression so civil discourse could occur. So the first quest for the historical Jesus was less about knowing the facts about Jesus. It was a critique aimed at the dogmatic Christ of faith.

John Locke (1632-1704) claimed that there were truths that transcended human reason, but claimed that there could be no supernatural truths that contradicted human reason. He affirmed the reality of Jesus' miracles as empirical evidence of Jesus' divinity, but he also

argued that it fell to reason to discern whether a miracle had in fact occurred. He sought to maximize the importance of human reason for authentic faith.

David Hume (1711-76) built on Locke's empiricism but ultimately challenged him. Hume argued that there were no 'self-evident' propositions of unchangeable truth. We must avoid the idea of certainty and recognise probability as the proper domain of human knowledge.

Influenced by Locke and Hume, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) included freedom of religion in the Bill of Rights. Looking at the historical Jesus could not be done within an established church because the church needed the post-resurrection Christ, as the church defined him, to maintain power and control. But once Jefferson opened the door separating church and state, the historical Jesus could be focused on and explored.

Albert Schweitzer brought an end to the first Quest. He published *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* that rubbished liberal scholarship because he felt they were making Jesus into their own image. He argued that liberal scholars were not really searching for the historical Jesus, but were actually engaged in a struggle against what they viewed as the tyranny of dogma. He failed to recognise that they were seeking to move Christian theology from an emphasis on doctrines by which the church had sought to secure its power over civil society, to an emphasis on the historical Jesus that would enable the church to become both intelligible and credible.

The second Quest is called the New Quest.

We now move to the early 20th century. This was a world where in general people still went to church, so Christianity reigned supreme, but no longer controlled civil discourse. There was freedom to publish. But after WWI trust in human rational behaviour became suspect. People turned to scripture as their authority. There was a movement to minimise reason and put more trust in Revelation. Its most prominent theologian was Karl Barth who created a theology now known as neo-orthodoxy. It was an attempt to keep secular culture at bay. He sought to radically separate the church from the culture and create a smaller Christendom—a separate world of faith. Barthians sought to salvage the church's internal authority over the faithful. The church was to be in the world but not of it. To do that reason and scholarship were to be considered suspect. The Word of God was all we needed for faith, in their perspective.

His efforts incited the new Quest. Theologians began looking not just at Jesus' humanity but also human reason's ability to know something of the core of Jesus' preaching.

Existentialism became key to this Quest. Existentialism in its search for meaning to life found only human uncertainty. The New Quest theologians looked at Jesus in terms of the human desire to understand why we are here. The limitations of neo-orthodoxy challenged Paul Tillich to look for meaning in faith. He came up with the concept that God was the "Ground of Being." That invited looking at Jesus and how he revealed that God.

Theologians of this period sought to correct what they interpreted in neo-orthodoxy as an over-rejection of human experience and the modern, secular world. They sought to reconnect theology to human experience. It was during this Quest that Feminist Theology, Liberation Theology, Black Theology and Queer Theology came to the fore in the 1980's.

The final Quest -- The Renewed Quest -- brings us into the present moment. While the first two quests were European in origin, the third was primarily an American quest. It was a response to the growing power of Pentecostal and Fundamental religions in the public discourse during the time of Reagan. He created power by joining traditional Republicans with The Christian Coalition under Pat Robertson and The Moral Majority under Jerry

Falwell. They both took advantage of increasing biblical illiteracy and moved the nation firmly to the right.

In addition to the socio-political context, there was a profound paradigm shift occurring in academia. It was a shift from a focus on the human subject to a focus on language as the medium in which all experience occurs and within which all experience is both constructed and interpreted. In the words of the philosopher Heidegger, "Language is the house of being." This shift is described as post-modernism. The shift to language made truth a moving target.

In 1993 Robert Funk and John Dominic Crossan decided that if they were to counter the religious right they had to move biblical theology out of the academy into the public sphere. They invited scholars to move outside of both the church and academy in order to address a wider, public audience. They called it the Jesus Seminar. It committed itself to study not only the New Testament but also texts outside of it such as the Gospel of Thomas. Most importantly it committed itself to study these texts without regard to Christian doctrine. Their initial task was to create a database of the words of Jesus that were authentic to him. Secondly, the Seminar looked at the context in which Jesus lived, the Mediterranean world ruled by Rome. Without doing the latter, it could be missed that Jesus was a radical subverting an oppressive political and religious culture—not just a good man.

Using the work of the Seminar many of its participants have gone on to re-image faith. They popularised the historical Jesus without regard to the dogmas and doctrines of the Church. These efforts all fall under what we mean by Progressive Christianity.

Those of us who came this route to being progressive Christians believe that following the path and teachings of Jesus can lead to an awareness and experience of the Sacred and the Oneness and Unity of all life.

We affirm that the teachings of Jesus provide but one of many ways to experience the Sacredness and Oneness of life, and that we can draw from diverse sources of wisdom in our spiritual journey.

We seek community that is inclusive of ALL people including people of any faith or no faith.

We know that how we behave towards one another is the fullest expression of what we believe.

We find grace in the search for understanding and believe there is more value in questioning than in absolutes.

We strive for peace and justice among all people.

We strive to protect and restore the integrity of our Earth.

We commit to a path of life-long learning, compassion, and selfless love.

Lastly a progressive Christian considers themselves autonomous, the final authority in matters of belief, doctrine, and biblical interpretation as based on one's own reason or experience or, more likely, a combination of the two. A progressive Christian is open to input from external sources but in the end decides on their own truth. He or she insists on the right of individuals and groups to determine for themselves what to believe or think.

So while I took a different path to catch up with Unitarians, a progressive Christian by any other name is a Unitarian Universalist. So, I was not surprised that after experiencing a service at St Matthew-in-the-City, a visiting Unitarian told me, "You guys are more Unitarian than Unitarians."