

## Who Knew? Unitarians Evolve.

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Two weeks ago I shared the story of my evolution from an orthodox theistic liberal Christian to a heterodox non-theistic progressive Christian to simply a follower of Jesus. That is a lot of evolving in a short time. It is like evolving from being a Neanderthal to a Homo sapiens in one 67-year lifetime. Social Philosopher William Irwin Thompson has said, “For the first time in human evolution, the individual life is long enough, and the cultural transformation swift enough, that the individual mind is now a constituent player in the global transformation of human culture.” I’m not sure how much my mind has transformed Christianity, but lots of folk thinking like I do have.

I got a glimpse of just how many minds at the Common Dreams conference on progressive religion that Rachel and I attended last week in Brisbane. Out of 300 attendees we represented 50% of all the self-identified Unitarian Universalists in attendance. A few others were Jewish or Muslim. Others had Buddhist leanings. There were a small number of traditional Christians, but nearly all the rest were some shade of progressive Christian.

In her opening keynote address, Australian theologian and author Val Webb acknowledged that the Unitarian Universalists have led the way for Christianity to follow. Robert M Price has described us as the “cowcatcher on the front of the theological locomotive: the first to clash with and dispense with all the sacred cows, one by one”. That metaphor reminded me of when my father explained to me that sacred cows make the best hamburger. The mainline denominations would catch up with us on point after point, followed even by some evangelical churches a few generations down the line, but Unitarians and Universalists had already cleared the rails for them.

This became evident in one small group breakout session we attended. There were about 18 of us. Only two had a traditional view of God. Most of the rest described their view as non-theist—meaning no belief in a personal god but who still experience transcendence -- or atheist—meaning no personal god or anything that transcends human beings. A couple were outspoken about their lack of interest in discussing God at all. In their opinion it was a waste of time discussing something that didn’t exist or matter. Viewing Jesus as divine was not even considered an issue. He was a man, full stop. Yet, except for us, all the others would have described themselves as Christians, even though most would have been quite at home sitting here this morning. Thirty-five years ago, when I was ordained, expressing such beliefs at a Christian conference would have been unimaginable. Acknowledging the Unitarians’ role in this progressive transformation even more so. It is a far cry from when Unitarian ministers were not welcome to join local ministerial associations because we did not accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. It was only 114 years ago -- the night before the first service was held in this building – graffiti was painted on the front of the church declaring, “This is the house of the Devil.”

The evolution of this spiritual revolution began slowly before catching fire in my lifetime. The first sacred cow to be swept away was the idea of Jesus being one with and of the same substance as God. This was a debate that went on for the first three

centuries of Christianity. It was a debate that was tearing Christendom apart. On one side of the argument were people like Origen and Arius and on the other side Athanasius. Origen was an acclaimed scholar and later bishop who accepted that there was a relationship between God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He described God as the candle's flame. Jesus as the light that emanated from it and the Holy Spirit as the warmth that came from it. A nice metaphor but for those who followed Athanasius it was heresy because it made Jesus and the Holy Spirit less than God. For this heresy and his belief in Universalism, that all souls would be reunited with God, Origen, Christianity's greatest theologian to date was banished and his position as bishop was revoked.

Origen's views did not go away with his death. The debate continued to simmer until Arius, a young priest, turned up the heat. He was highly influenced by Origen's belief that Jesus was subordinate to God, but he disagreed with Origen's idea that Christ was eternal. He argued that there was a time when Jesus was not. In a nutshell, Arius maintained that the Son possessed neither the eternity nor the true divinity of the Father, but was rather made "God" only by the Father's permission and power. In other words, Arius, in denying the Trinity, could claim to be the first Unitarian.

It was Arius' ideas that pushed Emperor Constantine to call for a council of bishops at Nicaea to debate the controversy. It was a heated debate lasting over two years, but in the end Constantine favoured the side arguing that Jesus was divine. It was politically expedient to have a divine Jesus. The Arian bishops were forced to agree to the Nicene Creed or face banishment and excommunication. All of Arius' writings were destroyed for being "heretical". Most of what we know about him is in the writings of his detractors. But his ideas were not stamped out. Arians continued to become bishops, including Arius himself. Even later emperors were Arians. But it was a dangerous position to hold as the church became increasingly powerful.

Arianism could be followed openly more safely in the eastern half of the Roman Empire. The Cathars were one example. They are believed to have begun in Persia and then moved to the Balkans and eventually to southern France where they flourished until 1208. In that year Pope Innocent III called for a holy crusade against them. In truth it was a war of terror. Over half a million men, women and children in the Languedoc region of France were massacred, many of them Catholic, to make sure Arianism was stamped out. Again it failed, but that did not stop the Church's efforts.

In 1529 Ludwig Haetzer was beheaded in Konstanz, Germany at the age of 29 for writing that Jesus was a leader and a teacher only. He was not divine or an object of worship.

In 1539, in Krakow, Poland, 80-year-old Katherine Weigel was burned at the stake for believing that Jesus was fully human. For her crime, Weigel was confined to a small chapel until she would recant. She would not. After ten years of confinement, when she still refused to accept the doctrine of the trinity, she was taken from the chapel into the village square and executed. Her last words speak powerfully to a portion of what has come to be central to a Unitarian view of life: "Neither in this life or the next can anything evil befall the soul of one who stands loyal to the truth as one is given to know it."

In an ironic twist, Queen Bona Sfoza, who had reluctantly ordered Weigel's execution to appease the Catholic Church, which was still greatly feared after what had happened to the Cathars, would be the mother of the first and only Unitarian king, Sigismund II of Poland. Sigismund would be the first in Europe to declare religious freedom and toleration in his kingdom. Having no heirs, a Catholic monarch succeeded him, renouncing his edicts of toleration. But that cat was not going to be put back in the bag easily.

In 1531, Michael Servetus, a brilliant biblical scholar, had published *On the Errors of the Trinity*. It was extremely popular in giving public support to all the Arians who were keeping their heads down. However, it was his *The Restoration of Christianity* that would lead to his death in 1553. Pursued by both the Inquisition and John Calvin for heresy he naively went to Geneva to debate Calvin. Calvin promptly arrested him, tried him in a kangaroo court and burned him at the stake. He is considered the first martyr of the Unitarian movement. His ideas spread to Poland and Hungary where they influenced the likes of Francis David, whose arguments for Unitarianism and religious toleration influenced King Sigismund. David would eventually die in prison for his beliefs, but the modern Unitarian movement was now a reality. It had a strong foothold in both Poland and Hungary and would soon spread to England and from there to America. A divine Jesus and the Trinity had finally been swept from the tracks.

Having rescued God from Christian Trinitarian orthodoxy, and after one and a half millennia of persecution, Unitarians were ready for an Age of Enlightenment. The time was ripe for more sacred cows to be swept away. Rationalism and humanism transformed how God was viewed. God was no longer personal and concrete, but more abstract. Emerson used "Oversoul" to describe God. The divine, thanks to the Transcendentalists, began to be found in nature and the divine spark in humankind as well. Scripture came to be understood as a human creation not the divine, inerrant "Word of God". And as Christ was jettisoned from his throne in heaven to descend earthward, humankind was lifted upward from being sinners needing to be rescued by the blood of Christ to being exalted. Protagoras' view became dominant that "Man is the measure of all things: of the things that are, that they are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."

Enlightenment Rationalism found its religious home with Unitarians and Universalists as nowhere else, though the Liberal Protestant theology of the nineteenth century and up to the Great War briefly caught up, only to retreat shortly thereafter to the comfortable irrationalism of Neo-Orthodoxy or Fundamentalism.

In spite of all the sacred cows cleared from the rails, Unitarians and Universalists still considered themselves Christian. Jesus was still preached. The sacraments were still administered and in places like King's Chapel, Boston, they still are. But in 1961 when the two cousins merged to be the Unitarian Universalist Association they no longer identified as Christian. Deeds not creeds became the motto. Judeo-Christian heritage is still honoured but so is the wisdom of the world's great religions. Even paganism, which Christianity expended great effort to either stamp out or co-opt, was welcomed back into the fold. With the sacred cow of Christian primacy over other

religions removed, even progressive Christians now feel free to celebrate Pluralism Sundays.

From my experience in Brisbane, we are everything progressive Christians seek to become. But we are not through evolving. There are more sacred cows to mince. We are living in a post-modern world, which confronts the rational humanism at our Unitarian heart: The idea that we can think our way to a single truth.

Post-modernism rejects logocentrism, which is central to western thought--the idea that we can describe all knowledge and experience with words and language. With the dethronement of logocentrism, we can feel free to explore spiritual experiences without having to explain them and to account for them first.

Robert Price argues, "Unitarian Universalist theology needs [to] empty itself of Rationalism, Humanism, and its bias toward a single 'unitarian' synthesis point, or Ultimate Concern. 'Universalism' must give way to multiversalism or pluriversalism."

Today a rapidly increasing number of Unitarian Universalists feel the need to transcend (as Emerson did) the sometimes-dry moralism of Immanuel Kant's "religion within the bounds of reason alone," as it lacks any mystical, spiritual dimension. Many, embrace what some call "ecstatic naturalism," where it is the divine spirit manifest in human arts and glories that catches away the breath and catches one up to the third heaven.

We are very much a part of this evolutionary step. We are not witnesses to it, but part of it. Our individual minds are, in Thompson's words, a "constituent player" in the transformation of our faith. I admit that is a little scary. The unknown always is. But we follow a host of Unitarians and Universalists who ventured into their unknown, sometimes at great personal price, to shape their faith in response to their context. Stepping into that unknown is what we do. Other faiths are depending on us to clear the tracks.