



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Seeing is not believing; believing is seeing

Clay Nelson © 19 December 2021

I need to begin this musing with a warning to those who might be triggered by words like Jesus or Christianity. On the Sunday before Christmas, I give myself permission to express some of my thoughts and ideas about progressive Christianity, which are the foundation of my faith. My justification is that both of the denominations that make up Unitarian Universalism were progressive Christians before we had a term for it. While Unitarian Universalism no longer identifies only with Christianity, many of our members are [progressive Christians](#) or Christians without God as I like to call them. For those who are repelled by Christianity either because they have experienced toxic Christianity or count themselves amongst rationalists and humanists or follow another faith tradition they bring to the mix, I hope learning about the scholarship that has revealed a very different Christianity from what we normally see around us will be both enlightening and beneficial.

Much of what I'm going to share with you is from a recently published book called [After Jesus before Christianity](#). It reports ten years of research by a diverse and large seminar of biblical scholars who are part of the [Westar Institute](#). This Institute has produced two previous major studies that have greatly broadened our understanding of what Jesus really said and what Jesus really did. In turn those works have greatly influenced many other scholars and many preachers, including this one. I became an Associate Fellow of the Institute at its founding 40 years ago.

What the scholars focused on were the first two centuries following the death of Jesus and before something that might resemble what we call Christianity today. They had a multitude of questions to explore:

How do we perceive the founding story of Christianity? What really transpired during the first two hundred years after Jesus? Did early churches exist in the immediate aftermath of Jesus? Were there powerful, unseen dynamics behind the emergence of "Jesus groups"? Did these communities share a cohesive set of beliefs? What about women — were they "imperfect men" in need of fixing? Or boundary violators who sometimes led the way? Were "Jesus

people” being martyred left and right by the Romans? Were there religious info-wars between the orthodox and the heretics? Did Christianity as we know it even exist in those pivotal two centuries?

The major challenge is the Church’s master narrative of the two hundred years after Jesus. It had conceptualised them by looking back and moulding events to fit the beliefs of an already established paradigm.

Umberto Eco recounts how the thirteenth-century Italian explorer Marco Polo searched for unicorns and doggedly claimed to have found them. At the time, European culture accepted the existence of these mythical creatures. What he actually discovered were Asian rhinos, animals for which he had no image or language. Marco Polo fell victim to what Eco refers to as “background books.” These invisible books, Eco writes, are our “preconceived notions of the world, derived from our cultural tradition. In a very curious sense we travel knowing in advance what we are on the verge of discovering, because past reading has told us what we are supposed to discover.” We see things not as they are, but as we are, the saying goes. It turns out, seeing is not believing so much as believing is seeing.

Questions will save us from our blindness. They will plunge us into the freedom of unknowing.

The first two centuries are an era of immense social crisis transpiring across the Mediterranean world, giving rise to disparate “Jesus groups,” an array of communities from wisdom schools to supper clubs. Displaced, oppressed, and terrorized, the people in these communities are in search of identity and belonging, of ways to resist violence, torture, and authoritarianism. They capsize the rules of gender. They create diverse documents — hidden transcripts, stories, poems and songs that disguise their rebellion, offering them strategies and catharsis, inspiring courage, and soothing their heartache.

The world today wrestles with its own social crises — terrorism; authoritarianism; displacement; racial, gender, and ethnic oppression; climate change; global pandemics; the breakdown of religious structures and of democratic institutions.

Theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking defines genius as “radical humility.” When you humble yourself to all that you don’t know, he explains, you open yourself to what’s possible. In that sense, those two centuries after Jesus were

not full of implicit Christianness, so to speak, but lots of radical humility. That period had lots of new — not Christian — innovative peoples, groups, and movements inspired by Jesus but going in many different directions.

The Westar Institute's scholarly experiment relies on reading history forward. Too often, we turn to look behind us. We fall victim to the fallacy of the inevitable. Because it happened, it had to happen; we use future events to understand the past. This fallacy is a constant temptation because it scares us back into what we already know, or into what we think we know. Questions like "How did we get to where we are now?" are interested more in the present than in the past.

Reading history backwards blinds us to the open character of the future. When we approach history backwards, we are always informed by the present. Here we are, in the twenty-first century, with diverse forms, traditions, and structures of Christianity. And of Unitarianism, I might add. The question up to this point has been "How did we wind up in this place?" We look to the past, seeking our links — here are the steps that got us here; here are the causes that led to these effects, with an emphasis much more on those effects we experience in the present than causes we identify in the past. We have been trying to construct a building from the top. Building a skyscraper, however, does not begin with the penthouse.

The "master narrative" of Christianity has been the traditional way in which history was read backwards. It refers to the conventional story of early Christianity, the notion that the origins of Christianity are settled, in need of no new data. This big story is stuck in our heads, not as fact, and despite our often knowing better. Here is the basic outline of the master narrative:

Jesus came down from heaven to establish the Christian church. He was a fantastic person whose birth marks the very beginning of civilisations. He taught the truth and did god-sized things. He handed on his complete teachings to his most loyal followers, the apostles. These apostles then relayed correctly to the bishops of the early churches all of the great things Jesus said and did. These first bishops correctly passed down Jesus's teachings and magnificent deeds to the next two-plus centuries of bishops. The faithful line of bishops summarized perfectly Jesus's teachings and acts in the fourth-century Nicene Creed, which carried full truth and authority to the twenty-first century.

The idea that the master narrative's assumption that "Christianity" acted as a unified, continuous early tradition in unbroken line representing a single truth makes little sense. That is why members of the Westar seminar questioned, and ultimately rejected, the master narrative of Christianity's birth.

Much new research points to multiple and different stories of Jesus peoples (not "Christians") in the first two centuries. The seminar's work on these first two centuries resembles not a predestined master story but more a set of mosaic tiles in the process of being pieced together. Many pieces are still missing, and at times, some pieces pop into unexpected places. More accurately, these vibrant, many-shaped tiles work to create not one story, but many; the picture of the Jesus peoples of the first two centuries ends up more like the view inside a kaleidoscope, the tiles shifting and the picture changing with each turn of the cylinder. It is important for Unitarians and Universalists to know that both of our stories were each a tile.

As later forms of Christianity began to be viewed as more orthodox — advocating "proper" belief and practice — the master narrative heavily influenced European and American societies, projecting "proper" Christianity's own power and belief systems back onto the earliest centuries. Writers of the master narrative reduced a wide variety of ideas, stories, and poetics to a simple either/or of orthodoxy or heresy. This self-serving manipulation diminished the breadth of practice and experimentation of the early Jesus peoples.

If we stand on the ground of Rome, of Athens, of urban and rural spaces across the Mediterranean in the first two centuries CE, we do not see anything resembling contemporary "Christianity," or, for that matter, "Christianity" as it was in the later ancient world, in the Middle Ages, or across human history. In the first two centuries, what we think of as "Christianity" did not exist. What happens when we approach the first two centuries forward, rather than backwards? What happens if we start at the very beginning and see what happens from there, taking one careful step forward at a time, with minds open to an unknown, unassumed future? This groundbreaking, holistic approach yields incredible and surprising results. The discoveries we encounter show us, among other things, a world of Roman violence, the emergence of new genders and forms of family, and an Israel both creative and traumatised.

There is so much more to share with you about this crucial time. I may have to break my rule and speak to these learnings more than once in the new year.

For what I take away from this work is that in many respects they were us and we are them. UU values were strongly present in the diverse tiles found in those first two centuries. One of the things you can say about UU churches and fellowships is that no two are alike — like those early tiles. They differ greatly in many ways except one. They are all committed to the Seven Principles. In my imagination the seven principles are the embodiment of Jesus. He encompassed them all. However, how we interpret them and live them out in our deeds varies greatly. I am not troubled by this lack of uniformity, in fact it is a reason to rejoice. It provides an environment for creativity often lacking in institutions, religious or otherwise, that impose a master narrative on their past, stifling their future. Instead, we choose to plunge into the freedom of unknowing.

Conversation Starter:

How do you feel about entering a future of unknowing filled with more questions than answers?