



Auckland Unitarian Church  
Love beyond belief

# Humanizing Christianity

Mal Green © 21 July 2024

## **Pepcha**

Tēnā koutou katoa

Ko Kōtirana, ko Aerana, ko Ingarangi te whakapaparanga mai

Ko Owairaka to maunga

Engari, ko Titirangi te whenua tupu

I nāianeī, ko Te Onewa te kāinga

Nō Tāmaki Makaurau ahau

He Kaiako au i Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

Ko Penman-Cooney te hapu

Ko Green-Clark te whānau

Ko Mal Green toku ingoa

I am a fifth generation descendant of Scottish, Irish, English immigrants to Aoteroa. I was born in Mt Albert, grew up in Titirangi, live now in Northcote. I teach at Massey University. I come from the Penman-Cooney extended family. My immediate family is Green-Clark. I am Mal Green.

Today I will share a bit of my spiritual whakapapa.

I was born into an evangelical Christian family – a missionary evangelical family that has produced countless missionaries and pastors. The main motif in this spiritual orientation was vindictive – if you did the right things and pleased God, you were blessed; if you did the wrong things and offended God, you were damned. So, God was judgemental; the world is evil; humans are depraved; Jesus is divine. I got involved in youth clubs, performed at and produced concerts, toured with performing arts groups, ended up in church leadership, wrote pamphlets – all to spread the message.

Then, in my twenties, I moved in a Pentecostal expression of evangelical Christianity. The main motif in this spiritual orientation was triumphalist – there is an interventionist, omnipotent deity who can miraculously solve anything (but hardly ever does!). I took part in

healing meetings, exorcisms, and helped a reasonably well-known lawyer, business man, evangelist, Bill Subritzky in some of his meetings.

These spiritual orientations emphasised the importance of being saved from the evil world, depraves humans, sinful self – emphasis was on an imagined world to come called heaven or the new heavens and the new earth.

The longer I stayed in this evangelical Pentecostal orientation and the more I studied theology, the more a problem appeared. The Judeo-Christian scriptures contained portraits of a loving, caring, compassionate deity; declarations of the beauty of the world; assertions of the nobility and wonderfulness of humans; acknowledgement that not everything is solved or solvable. These conflicted with what the evangelical Pentecostal orientations were based on. The reading we had earlier “Being human” captures the struggles I went through in my journey out of evangelical Pentecostal Christianity. One defining moment as at an Easter Art exhibition my wife used to curate in our church building. I used to produce a pamphlet or two as discussion starters for conversations in the café at the exhibition. Near the end of my time in evangelical Pentecostal Christianity, I wrote a pamphlet on who Jesus was and used a cartoon of a chocolate Easter bunny on a cross with one ear missing and the caption, “Forgive them for they know not what they chew.” You can imagine the reaction from the church people – quite different to the reaction from the public.

So I began considering a more humanist orientation in my spirituality. I discovered the main motif in this orientation was inclusivity. I began exploring following Jesus as an example of humanity with a humanising mission.

This spiritual orientation emphasises being part of a world here and now to enjoy, engage with, make a contribution to. The opening words Corinne read express this beautifully.

What is humanising? What does it mean to me? I was thrilled to look through various documents Ted shared with me from the Unitarian Universalist community on humanism and the principles of community and find resonance with the understanding of humanising that I have been trying to enact and express over the past 20 years. For me, humanising involves:

- Self-actualisation – attaining and encouraging others to attain their potential as humans and discover fulfilment and significance
- Compassion – for all – especially those on the margins
- Respect – my and others worth and dignity
- Accept – suspending judgement
- Advocate – individual, group, and systemic justice for all
- Nourish – improving the human condition

I started coming out as a humanist about 20 years ago and encountered challenge and push back from former colleagues, congregants, friends, and family still embedded in evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. So, I turned to the Judeo-Christian scripture in which I had spent so much time as a Christian, pastor, elder, missionary, leader, seminary teacher, and writer and looked for an answer to my critics. Here’s what I found in this source that is included in the six sources of the principles and spirituality of the Unitarian Universalist community.

I start at the beginning of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. The creation myth consistently emphasises that humans are made in the image of the creator. The humans created were judged by the creator to be the perfect expression of humanity due to their unimpeded relationship with their creator. The story of the fall is a description of the perfect humans being seduced into believing independent, self-preservation was the point of life (the serpent's tantalising offer) rather than the communal care of all people to enable them to experience the humanity with which the creator imbued them.

Over the next few thousand years, according to the Old Testament scriptures, people identified as prophets continually called those who claimed to follow Yahweh to return to treating all people as human and stop treating some (or many) of them like animals to be used and abused for personal gain and preservation. In other words, the call was to humanise others to enable people to have an experience as close as possible to that of the first humans before the fall in the Jewish creation myth.

When the prophet project manifestly failed to bring people back to the creator's vision of humanity, the New Testament scriptures announce a new strategy. The use of the terms "new creation," "new Adam," "son of God," and "oneness of Father and Son" indicate the presentation of a repeat, perfect expression of humanity from the creator. This expression provided a perfect example of humanity for people to follow through his supposed uninterrupted communion with the creator. Moreover, it included the ability to lead all humans to be engaged in becoming better expressions of perfect humanity and helping others become the same through entering into closer communion with the creator.

When we read the stories about Jesus' sayings and actions in the gospels in this light, we see him explicitly and deliberately opposing the beliefs and acts of the Judaist religious tradition the prophets had called out that had dehumanised many in their communities through deprivation, exclusion, marginalisation, and dogmatism. The theme of Jesus' words and actions shows a strong commitment to provision, inclusion, incorporation, and openness to other perspectives on previously non-negotiable beliefs. One of the strongest calls for followers of Jesus to be engaged in the enterprise of humanising others and themselves is in Matthew 25:31-46. Here Jesus is portrayed as a judge excluding from an eternity in the presence of the creator those who simply believed the right things but dehumanised others. However, those who appeared not to believe the right things but manifestly engaged in Jesus' humanising enterprise were welcomed into this imagined eternity.

And so, here I am – a humanising follower of Jesus.

### **Meditation / Conversation starter**

Our principles, like Jesus' teachings and example, are fundamentally humanising. The first 2 principles are directly focused on this. But are **we** in our thoughts, talk and action?

- What can we do – as individuals and as a community – to live the humanising values in our faith?
- What are examples?