

Unitarian Universalism – Part 5

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Theology – Part 2

Jesus Christ

Unitarian Universalists [UUs] have almost as many views of Jesus Christ as are imaginable, but most of them see Him as a good man with good teachings, not so different from the good and wise men in all ages. There is one consensus about Christ, however, which seems to find universal UU agreement; He is not a divine, atoning Savior.

UU minister Waldeman Argow declares of UUs: “They do not regard him as a supernatural creature, the literal son of God who was miraculously sent to earth as part of an involved plan for the salvation of human souls.”¹ In fact, Argow incorrectly maintains that to accept the biblical portrait (which teaches both Jesus Christ’s full humanity and undiminished deity), is to make Him irrelevant, for then, supposedly, He is a God that people cannot relate to. Citing Theodore Parker,

[If] as some early Christians began to do, you take a heathen view, and make him a God, the Son of God in a peculiar and exclusive sense—much of the significance of his character is gone. His virtue has no merit; his love no feeling; his cross no burden; his agony no pain. His death is an illusion; his resurrection but a show.²

Parker, who originally made the previous statement at his May 19, 1841, Boston lecture, actually began the lecture by quoting Luke 21:33, where Jesus said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away”! For most UUs today Jesus’ words have passed away and have little if any relevance.

Other UUs of religious persuasion may claim to respect and revere Jesus, but it is principally a Jesus of their own making. They discard any teachings or deeds of Jesus that they personally dislike, particularly His miracles. With liberal theologians generally, UU adherents are “much more impressed by and committed to the historical Jesus than by or to the theological Christ.”³ In other words, UUs prefer the “real” nondivine Jesus of history, whom Christianity allegedly distorted in the process of inventing its own ideas about Jesus as a “theological Christ.”

At best, for UU people, Jesus is an example of one who had faith in humanity, but He is never the object of faith for humanity (John 3:16) or a revealer of the one true God (John 17:3). From “the babe in the manger legend” to the “symbolism as po-

etry” of the resurrection, the life of the *biblical* Jesus is rejected and ridiculed. As far back as 1867 (and before), Jesus Christ was being assaulted by Unitarianism. The “Fifty Affirmations of Free Religion” of the Unitarian Free Religious Association (1867) stated in point 34 their desire that “the completion of the religious protest against authority must be the extinction of faith in the Christian Confession,” the belief that Jesus was the Messiah.⁴

By accepting the discredited methods and findings of higher criticism and the Jesus Seminar, most UU ministers and laypeople today believe that they can know little if anything about the “real” Jesus. Therefore, they are free to reinvent Him in any form they wish. The average UU person is not interested in the compelling historic evidence for the biblical portrait of Jesus, but only in whatever he or she wants to believe.

I have my own picture of Jesus, a fictional picture of course, but as valid for me as any of the other fictional pictures. It is based on descriptions and narratives in the Gospels and I admit I have taken only those things that I want for my picture and have ignored those things I do not want.⁵

The most influential English Unitarian, James Martineau (1805-1900), stated what has come to be a common UU belief: “The incarnation is true, not of Christ exclusively, but of Man universally.”⁶ Further, the Person of Jesus is not unique: “I admire the spiritual force and ethical direction of the Nazarene, but he was neither perfect nor infallible. He is not to be worshipped.”⁷ This same minister declares, “I accept Jesus as my Christ,” and he states that he hopes to be “true to his [Jesus Christ’s] discipleship.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the biblical antagonist and leader of the transcendentalist movement, spent two years in the Unitarian ministry. His famous July 15, 1838 “Harvard Divinity School Address” still reflects the views of a majority of modern UU adherents: “Historic Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion.... It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the *person of Jesus*.”⁸

UU minister and professor Jack Mendelsohn repeats the long discredited “Paul invented Jesus” theory, for which there was never a shred of evidence. “Most of us believe that on the basis of the evidence available to us, Jesus, at most, thought of himself as the Jewish Messiah. It was later followers and interpreters, like the Apostle Paul, who transformed Jesus into a Christian Savior atoning to God for the sins of mankind.” Incredibly, Mendelsohn claims that the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity were never accepted by Christians until officially formulated at the Nicean council in A.D. 325. “The deity of Jesus thus became the official orthodoxy of Christian religion.”⁹ This is proven incorrect by looking at numerous early church Fathers who unequivocally defended Christ’s deity.

Sin, Salvation, the Atonement

The history of Universalism indicates continued disagreement among its members as to what sin is, whether it exists and whether it could or should be punished by God. Some early UU people insisted that the death of Christ made all punish-

ment of sin unnecessary. Most contemporary religious UU people, if they believe in sin and the afterlife at all, think people are punished for sins only while on earth by the natural consequences of their own mistakes. Others may hold to a purgatorial view.

Regardless, in UU, salvation (if we may use the term) is not from sin and God's wrath against it, but from whatever human conditions prevent individual self-fulfillment. This may be referred to in political, sexual, economic, environmental, gender, social or global categories. People need to be saved from the harsh realities of an imperfect world, not from an infinitely righteous God whose holiness demands a judgment upon humans that sin. In one sense (presupposing UU views on ethics and good character), salvation can be achieved by improvement in personal character through sincere effort.

In 1803 the Universalists adopted the *Winchester Profession*, which became the expression of Universalist doctrine. It used the phrase "salvation by character," which has continued to this day.

The UU view of "salvation," then, means complete trust in one's own resources and ability to save oneself from whatever one does not like, while God's concerns as to the nature and method of salvation are discarded (Gal. 1:6-9; Rom. 3:28). Argow argues: "The concept of original sin and the doctrine that human beings have to be saved from the consequences of that sin are utterly foreign to the thinking of religious liberals.... 'Salvation by character' as Unitarian Universalists sometimes call it... is at once their faith and their aim."¹⁰

Mendelsohn, referring to good works in general, and faith in man in particular, concludes; "This is what we mean when we say we believe in salvation by character. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say, salvation *is* character, for we do not mean that character saves a man from the flames of an imaginary hell or for the bliss of an equally imaginary heaven. We do not profess to know the precise dimensions of immortality."¹¹

Parker stated a similar theme; "It is not so much by the Christ who lived so blameless and beautiful eighteen centuries ago, that we are saved directly, but by the Christ we form in our hearts and live out in our daily life, that we save ourselves."¹²

Since UU has no absolute standard for right and wrong, "sin" can only be considered in relative terms. People decide for themselves what sin is or is not, or even if sin is real. What is sin to one person may be joy to another. For those UU who do believe in sin, sin is "atoned" for by character and good works. The good works typically involve social and cultural reconstruction: radical education; liberal ideas of criminal justice; animal, abortion, and homosexual rights; and so on. Unfortunately, they seem oblivious to the social and moral destruction that such ideas have wrought upon society.

Since many UU followers are secular humanists and materialists and believe that this life is all there is, such concern with social action, however misguided by UU philosophical premises, is understandable. However, with no clearly defined sense

of God's judgment upon sin in the next life, there is obviously little concern with "saving" someone's soul in this one.

Clearly, if one does not believe in Jesus' teachings on eternal punishment for those who reject Him (Matt. 25:46; John 8:24), one can hardly express concern for the lost. Mendelsohn asserts his offense at Jesus Christ, saying that the Jesus of the Gospels "is not the hope of the world": "We were suitably alarmed a few years ago when the World Council of Churches met in Evanston to proclaim impertinently that Christ is 'the hope of the world.' Our sense of the fitness of things was disturbed. We know that a theological Christ is not the hope of the world."¹³

UU minister Tom Owen-Towle declares: "A single savior, be it myself or Jesus Christ will not suffice.... We UU's don't promise salvation *from* eternal damnation or anything resembling it... Furthermore, we try, but with no guaranteed success, to save our followers from ignorance, mediocrity and despair. And finally you can rest assured, we will absolutely refuse to save anyone from themselves."¹⁴ This is why Mendelsohn declares, "We are not missionary minded."¹⁵ At least, that is, not for biblical concerns.

Some UUs may claim that UU does not actively seek converts, but this is not the case. Many UU people actively proselytize because those who are wise enough to have become enlightened on the subject of free thinking may naturally attempt to convert others from their "darkness." J. N. Booth refers to the UU necessity to "liberate" others "in body and mind," so they can live properly, in accordance with their own inner divinity.¹⁶ According to Mendelsohn, "a new zeal for 'telling our story' has blossomed among us," and "radio and TV are being increasingly used to present liberal religion."¹⁷

But UUs have no desire whatever for sharing the truth about Christ's death on the Cross for our sins. The following statement by one UU theologian illustrates UU views on the atonement of Christ: "No scapegoat can carry away the sin and punishment. No Savior can carry away the sin and punishment. No Savior can bear the penalty in our place."¹⁸ Thus, "Salvation is universal. People are capable of infinite improvement, liberalism asserts. When we *raise ourselves* onto a higher moral and spiritual plane, through living the exalted precepts of our religion, we are *achieving our own salvation*. By striving we are capable to build in ourselves, through noble works, an increasingly better character."¹⁹

A leading Unitarian, William Ellery Channing, "the Colossus of American religious liberalism," declared in his May 5, 1819 address that the idea of Christ's atonement was the most pernicious of errors.

We recollect, however, that, not long ago, it was common to hear of Christ as having died to appease God's wrath and to pay the debt of sinners to his inflexible justice... [such views are] a very degrading view of God's character. They give to the multitudes the impression, that the death of Jesus produces a change in the mind of God towards man, and that in this its efficacy chiefly consists. No error seems to us more pernicious.²⁰

Channing asks in all apparent sincerity, "We ask our adversaries then to point to some plain passage where it [Christ's atonement] is taught."²¹ How someone like

Channing could miss such obvious passages as the following is explainable only by personal bias, not by lack of scriptural testimony: Matthew 26:28; John 1:29; 6:51; Romans 3:25; 5:8-10; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Galatians 1:4; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14, 20; Hebrews 9:12; 10:10-12; 1 Peter 2:24; 3:18; 1 John 1:7; 2:2; 4:10; Revelation 1:5. Nevertheless, the atonement and collateral doctrines are for Channing “altogether... the fictions of theologians.”

Christianity is in no degree responsible for them. We are astonished at their prevalence. What can be plainer, than that God cannot, in any sense, be a sufferer, or bear a penalty in the room of his creatures?... How plain is it also, according to this doctrine, that God, instead of being plenteous in forgiveness, never forgives; for it seems absurd to speak of men as forgiven, when their whole punishment, or an equivalent to it, is borne by a substitute?... We believe, too, that this system is unfavorable to the character. It naturally leads men to think, that Christ came to change God’s mind rather than their own; that the highest object of his mission was to avert punishment, rather than to communicate holiness.... For ourselves, we have not so learned Jesus.²²

Perhaps this was the problem: UU people never learned of the biblical Jesus.

For UU people generally it is apparently too demeaning personally to believe that they or mankind generally should ever need an atoning Savior. “We are never Christians as he was the Christ, until we worship, as Jesus did, with no mediator, with nothing between us and the Father of all.”²³ This kind of spiritual pride betrays a pretentiousness and lack of trust in God. It illustrates why Jesus emphasized, “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). “If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24).

Man

Rather than affirm faith in God, UU believers affirm a positive and proactive faith in humanity.²⁴ A person is the child of God or Nature, full of goodness, with divine or evolutionary qualities latent but always emerging into fuller expression. “We assert the goodness of the individual person; we see the individual as the child of God.... We see humans standing high on the evolutionary ladder, with great potential for further growth, and even now possessing evidence of the divine.”²⁵

David Parke, discussing Unitarian history, notes, “Unitarianism broke its chains during the nineteenth century. The chain of doctrine, which bound previous generations to the Bible and to Christ, was cast off leaving men free to seek and affirm God within themselves as Reason, Soul and Conscience.”²⁶

Emerson stated what is a common belief among many UUs today, concerned as they are with social action and justice.

If a man is at heart just, then in so far is he God; the safety of God, the immortality of God, the majesty of God, do enter into that man with justice.... The sublime is excited in me by the great stoical doctrine, ‘Obey thyself.’ That which shows God in me, fortifies me. That which shows God out of me [Christianity], makes me a wart and a wen.²⁷

Indeed, prefiguring New Age teaching, Unitarian Universalists believe that we only obey God when we obey ourselves. God has no meaning apart from Man. “For me, the Eucharist is experiencing what Christ experienced: the willingness to pay any price, even death to maintain integrity and to make the claim, ‘I am God.’”²⁸ UU minister Richard Fewkes asserts: “The divinity of Christ points to the divinity in humankind.... A difference in degree, perhaps, but not a difference in kind or nature.... Perhaps all of us can also learn to respect the same divinity in all people, including ourselves. Christ’s declaration, ‘I and my Father are one,’ becomes the birthright of all humanity.”²⁹

The Afterlife

For UU followers, human reason and logic provide the tools for judging what may or may not occur after death. Many UUs have attacked the idea of heaven and hell as immoral. This was the view of William Ellery Channing (1780-1842), the leader of New England Unitarianism. Seeming to deny that one can come to love God because of His love and holiness, Hosea Ballou, a contemporary of Channing and—according to UU historian Cassara— “the greatest thinker produced by the Universalist movement,” declared that “the preaching of future rewards and punishments, for the purpose of inducing people to love God and moral virtue, is not only useless, but pernicious.”³⁰

However, the Bible teaches that the very reason we love God is because He loved us first (1 John 4:19). In addition, many biblical passages teach that God is going to reward those who love Him far beyond what they can ever imagine, so the preaching of future rewards is also an inducement to love God. Further, preaching divine judgment is clearly an inducement to moral virtue and has been for 2,000 years. Even Jesus taught it!

I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom to fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him (Lk. 12:4-5).

Further, “Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb. 12:10).

Many UU adherents do not claim to know about the afterlife; however, UU ideas on the subject run the gamut from non-existence to a basically spiritistic worldview. The one thing all UUs seem certain of is that there is no biblical heaven or hell. Reverend Albert Pery declares that UU believers “are confident that they will not be punished in a ‘Hereafter’ for errors and sins which they may have made; nor do they expect others, even those who disagree with them, to so suffer.”³¹ The reason is because, according to “reason” and human sentiment, it is totally “unthinkable for God, as a loving Father, to damn any of his children everlastingly to hell. The Nicene Creed must then be in error.”³²

Waldeman Argow, minister emeritus of the First Unitarian Church in Toledo, Ohio, after discussing the UU diversity of beliefs on immortality, asserts concerning the biblical views that “it seems safe to say that no Unitarian Universalist believes in a

resurrection of the body, a literal heaven or hell, or any kind of eternal punishment.”³³ Similarly, John Booth declares:

Merely to accept a particular religious doctrine will not change one’s eventual fate, or insure eternal bliss; but to live in the spirit of truth and goodness will have its own reward on earth and, whatever may be true of the afterlife, in the future. Most Unitarian Universalists feel certain there is no physical measurable heaven or hell of future existence.... [However] concerning the immortality of influence they hold no doubt.³⁴

In a 1966 National Opinion Research Center questionnaire, only 10.5 % of UU people polled stated a belief in personal existence after death, reflecting their rationalist and humanist presuppositions.³⁵ Today this figure would probably be much larger, a result of the increasing influence of NDE (Near Death Experience) research, parapsychology, the New Age and Eastern religious and occult ideas on UU.³⁶

Regardless, the average UU member seems much more concerned with this life than any possible next life. Reflecting evolutionary presuppositions, he believes death is a normal part of life, not something abnormal. Whatever may be the case after death, man secures immortality in the lifestream of humanity, not necessarily in his own continued personal existence. Reverend Tom Owen-Towle, of the First Unitarian Church in San Diego, stated that “death is not only real and natural, but it seems to me to be eminently desirable.” Speaking of the “glory of life” and the “majesty of death,” he stated that “both forces are holy.” (And in a typical caricature of heaven, he said that it was boring, being characterized by a “terrible constancy with no further growth nor change taking place.”³⁷

Certainly, for the typical UU, death is not the spiritual enemy of mankind that the Bible declares it is (1 Cor. 15:26). The Reverend Donald Harrington declares that “death is only an incident in life which brings to an end that one small part of the total evolving-life and makes possible the continuing renewal.”³⁸

The Occult

Due to its humanism and rationalism, the occult does not have a predominant place in the UU worldview. At least not under that name. Still, anyone who wished to pursue occult interests would not necessarily be frowned upon; it is simply up to them. However, the mysticism of religious humanism and parapsychology, the scientific approach to the occult, claiming to scientifically explore the “hidden or divine powers” of man, would be more consistent with the UU worldview, in which spiritual openness and tolerance for all sorts of religious humanism is only a step away from the world of the occult.³⁹

The following statement by one UU minister suggests an openness to the occult through subjectivism and a responsiveness to generalized transcendence:

I used to believe in an anthropomorphic god who governed everything, especially me. I shifted to a being of awesome power and purpose but less personal and divested of human trappings. Then I lost any operative concept of deity. I now am open and responsive to signs of transcendence in my life. Where

will my wrangling-with-the-god notion take me next?⁴⁰

Other UU followers are more openly New Age, as indicated by the large percentage (46 %) classifying themselves as humanist (religious as opposed to secular humanism has a strong New Age connection) and over 20 % classifying themselves as theist, mystic or Buddhist.

Notes

- 1 Waldeman Argow, "Unitarian Universalism: Some Questions Answered," UUA pamphlet, p. 13.
- 2 Conrad Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing, Emerson, Parke* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 137.
- 3 W. Argow, op cit., p. 6.
- 4 David Parke, *The Epic of Unitarianism Original Writings from the History of Liberal Religion* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 123.
- 5 Gilbert Phillips in Brandock Lovely (ed.), "Unitarian Universalist Views of Jesus," pp. 7-8, UUA pamphlet
- 6 Quoted by Richard Fewkes, in Brandock Lovely (ed), op cit., UUA pamphlet, p. 5; cf. Parke, op cit, pp. 72-76.
- 7 Richard Mazur, "Viewpoints Within Unitarian Universalist Christianity," p. 5, UUA pamphlet.
- 8 Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism*, p. 99.
- 9 Jack Mendelsohn, *Why I am a Unitarian Universalist* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 43.
- 10 W. Argow, op cit., p. 9, October 1978, no. 938, UUA pamphlet.
- 11 Mendelsohn, *Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist*, p. 31.
- 12 Wright, op cit., p. 144.
- 13 Transcribed Sermon, May 6, 1979, "Our Brand of Salvation," First Unitarian Church of San Diego, pp. 5-6.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 5-6.
- 15 Mendelsohn, "Meet the Unitarian Universalist," p. 10, UUA pamphlet.
- 16 "Introducing Unitarian Universalism," pp. 9-10, UUA pamphlet.
- 17 "Meet the Unitarian Universalist," p. 17, UUA pamphlet.
- 18 Ernest Cassara, *Universalism in America* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), p. 254, quoting Dr. John Van Schaik, Jr., in 1925.
- 19 John Booth, "Introducing Unitarian Universalism," UUA pamphlet, p. 16, emphasis added.
- 20 Wright, op cit., p. 76.
- 21 From *ibid.*, pp. 77-78.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- 24 G. Marshall, "Unitarian Universalists Believe," p. 2, UUA pamphlet.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Parke, op city., p. 68.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 106, 109.
- 28 Vern Barnet, "Unitarian Universalist Views of the Sacraments," March, 1978, p. 5, no. 8968-16, UUA pamphlet.
- 29 Fewkes in Lovely (ed.), p. 65.
- 30 Cassara, op cit., pp. 142, 17.
- 31 Robert Storer (ed.), "Unitarian Universalist Views of God," p. 9, UUA pamphlet.
- 32 J. Mendelsohn, "Meet the Unitarian Universalists," p. 14, March 1974, UUA pamphlet.
- 33 Fewkes in Lovely (ed.), p. 65.
- 34 J. Booth, "Introducing Unitarian Universalism," p. 15, UUA pamphlet.
- 35 "Unitarian Universalist Views of Death and Immortality," pp. 2, 10-11, UUA pamphlet.
- 36 *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11; cf. Wilson and Weldon, *Occult Shock and Psychic Forces*, section III.
- 37 Thomas Avon-Towle, "Both Forces Are Holy," pp. 7-11, (transcript of sermon).
- 38 D. Harrington, "I Believe," p. 4, April 1977, no. 4006-02, UUA pamphlet.
- 39 See Gary North, *Unholy Spirits: New Age Humanism and the Occult* (Fort Worth, TX: Dominion Press, 1986).
- 40 Sermon transcript, "What's Religious About Us?" p. 3, Rev. Thomas Owen-Towle, Feb. 4, 1979, First Unitarian Church of San Diego.

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