

Christianity in Transition

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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This is my fourth sermon in a series on World Religions, to go along with the classes I have been leading on Sunday afternoons on the same subject. I decided to do this series because I believe we are called, by our tradition, to recognize and understand the vast amount of wisdom from other world religions that has become our inspiration. Specifically, we are encouraged to learn about “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love [or the love by which we are surrounded] by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” This is part of the Sources of our Living Tradition, which are usually found listed right under the list of our Seven Principles.

On recent Sundays I have spoken about Judaism, Islam, and the Eastern Philosophies. Next week my sermon will not be about the subject of that afternoon’s class, Humanism, Naturalism, and Atheism, as we will be having an intergenerational service on the topic of our Seven Principles. Today I bring you something of the primary religious tradition out of which both Unitarianism and Universalism emerged: Christianity. I believe our shrinking world requires a certain familiarity with other religions that play more than a small part in much of what is happening today between people and the nations.

In addition, many of you have come to Unitarian Universalism out of more traditional faiths – you come with a certain baggage - many times this is negative baggage – and I would like you to feel *both* very happy here *and* more comfortable with your past religious experiences. You will find, in this sermon, that you have not been alone in your struggles with Christian doctrine.

I titled this sermon “Christianity in Transition” because Christianity is in transition. I’ll be talking quite a bit about specific criticisms of Christian beliefs and the possible negative side-effects that have come from those beliefs, but I want you to know that these are not just my criticisms. Most of the people who have voiced the strongest messages of the need for Christianity to change have come from within the faith, not from the outside looking in. I think this is important to know. I am not standing up here “Christian bashing.”

As Unitarian Universalists, we know from the history of our own tradition that certain doctrines of the Christian faith have been repeatedly questioned, almost from the beginning of Christianity itself. How many, over the years, were beheaded or burned for speaking their minds about the Biblical legitimacy of the doctrine of the trinity? “The Errors of the Trinity,” was the quite blunt title of the book Michael Servetus wrote in 1531. Every copy of this book (that they could find) was burned, along with Servetus, at the orders of Calvin.

In our reading this morning we heard a more modern account of personal and emotional (not just intellectual) doubt about Christian teachings on who gets into Heaven (and who

doesn't) and I imagine many of you recognized the pain Julia Cameron was experiencing. In our New UU classes one of the first things we do is tell our personal spiritual odysseys and I have heard some of your stories of no longer being able to accept the belief system that your previous church was calling the Truth. It is always sad to lose one's faith.

There are many reasons people leave their Christian roots, and, conversely, there are many reasons people quite often stay in their church communities, regardless of how their personal beliefs differ from the official Christian creed. And there are many people for whom Christianity continues to make sense, bringing them comfort in their lives and providing motivation for their good works.

But some of the very same reasons the original Unitarians and Universalists left the Trinitarian Christianity of the New England Congregational churches are coming to the surface again, and this time with more fervent voices of denial.

What are the major academic, theological, ecological, and even psychological arguments with Christian doctrine today? To look at these, first we need a basic, encompassing, definition of the essential beliefs of Christianity. Episcopal Bishop, John Shelby Spong, begins his 2001 book *A New Christianity for a New World* by listing what conservative Christians listed in 1910 as the five basic fundamentals of Christianity. They are:

The inspiration of scripture as the literal, revealed word of God.

The virgin birth as the miraculous and literal means by which the divine nature of Christ has been guaranteed.

The substitutionary view of the atonement that was accomplished in the death of Jesus. The affirmation of the saving power of his blood and the gift of salvation that was accomplished by his death.

The certainty of the physical bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The accuracy of both the empty-tomb and the appearance stories in the gospel tradition.

The truth of the second coming of Jesus, the reality of the Day of Judgment, which would be based on the record of one's life, and the certainty of heaven and hell as eternal places of reward and punishment.

You may be saying to yourself that there are lots of people who don't believe all this and still call themselves Christians. This is true, but the list I just read to you continues to comprise basic doctrinal Christianity. You'll notice that the list didn't feel it needed to mention a necessary belief in God.

I would say that the source of many changes coming to Christianity (and other traditional religions) will be the divide between secularism and theism. People are finding it more and more difficult to believe in the original theistic God of Judaism and Christianity. Spong defines this theistic God as "a being, supernatural in power, dwelling

outside this world and invading the world periodically to accomplish the divine will.” At the time in history when this god concept was formed, knowledge of nature and science was limited. The supernatural was not thought of as super-natural.

Today many of us have a very difficult time with this kind of mythological belief system. The discovering of Charles Darwin, for example, created major problems for some of those basic Christian tenets that I just read to you. But, at the time when that “fundamentalist” list was summarized, “to question or deny the truth of any of [those] five doctrines was thought to be an act not just of heresy, but of actual apostasy.” (Spong, p. 1) For those of you, like me, who don’t know what apostasy means, I looked it up: it means “renouncement of the faith.” Not just an argument with, but a renouncement of.....

Many recent environmentalists and feminist scholars have criticized the masculine, paternalistic, and dualistic nature of this original theistic God. It would be difficult to deny that the oppression of women has not had something to do with some of what I call the misinformed passages of the Bible and Christian doctrine and practices. The dualistic ideology of the spiritual versus the material, the sacred versus the mundane, the spirit versus the body has invaded our mindset in the western world and subtly enabled abusive behaviors. Thomas Berry, in The Dream of the Earth, writes that patriarchy has evolved as the “archetypal pattern of oppressive governance by men with little regard for the well-being or personal fulfillment of women, or for the destiny of the earth itself.” He calls patriarchy the “basic pathology of Western civilization.” (p. 143)

This is strong language, but I have seen it again and again in my reading.

This same artificially induced dualism between the spirit (good) and the body (bad) has been severely criticized for its role in our society’s rampant fear of our own bodies and sexuality. The excellent Unitarian Universalist program called Our Whole Lives, which some of our children are engaging in as we speak, is an effort, in part, to counter this negativity. According to Sallie McFague, “the earliest Christian texts and doctrines contain the seeds that, throughout history, have germinated into full-blown distrust of the body.” (The Body of God, p. 14) In addition she theorizes that centuries of Christian negativity about human sexuality and also its speculation about life after death have encouraged a diffidence toward the body at best, distrust and hatred of it at worst, extending over time into our inability to love the “body” of the earth, itself. (p. 16) What if, instead, “we dared to think of our planet and indeed the entire universe as the body of God?” (p. 19) McFague has written two wonderful books solely about different ways of defining God. She is a true Christian reconstructionist, not just a deconstructionist. It is one thing to criticize, it is far better to suggest viable alternatives.

Aside from theism itself, the atonement theology of Christianity (that in his death Jesus atoned for all our sins) is also being called back to the drawing board. Sallie McFague (again, although this time in her book Models of God), writes “In an era when evil powers were understood to be palpable principalities in contest with God for control of human beings, the metaphor of Christ as the victorious king and lord, crushing the evil

spirits and thereby freeing the world from their control, was indeed a powerful one. In our situation, however, to envision evil as separate from human beings rather than as the outcome of human decisions and actions, and to see the solution to evil as totally a divine responsibility, would be not only irrelevant to our time and its needs but harmful to them, for that would run counter to one of the central insights of the new sensibility: the need for human responsibility in the nuclear age.” (Models of God, p. 29-30)

A second criticism of classic atonement theology was the subject of my Easter sermon last year. In the Easter story, “Jesus is presented as the obedient son, accepting violence because his father wills it. The salvation offered by Jesus is gained by his sacrifice of himself to abuse. In other words, he accepts violence for the sake of his love for perpetrators of violence, whether it is God or sinful humanity. Defining love and relationship as obedience and sacrifice structures them in the terms of power and abuse....When control and love are confused, the faithful must believe even the most horrible and painful things are allowed or inflicted by God, that violence is supposed to happen, for the moral education of the victim or for a future reward.” (Rebecca Parker, Proverbs of Ashes, p. 156-157) Christianity can be seen as enabling a passivity toward one’s own abuse and suffering. Rebecca Parker, president of Starr King School for the Ministry, a UU Theological School, is adamant that this theology has created “a legacy of abuse entrenched in doctrine.” This is significant criticism, not just disagreement with abstract theological notions that do not affect real human life.

Marcus Borg’s reconstructionist Christian theology would have Christianity return to what is often referred to as the Pre-Easter Jesus, that is, Jesus without the additional trappings of resurrection and atonement responsibilities. This Jesus, according to Borg, was a Jewish mystic or “spirit person,” a healer, though not a performer of miracles, a wisdom teacher, and a social prophet. He was also brilliant, and dared to challenge the political and social domination systems of his day. (The God We Never Knew, p. 89-90)

The idea that human beings have been created in God’s image has also caused a great deal of trouble, according to many. This anthropocentrism has “determined our language, our intellectual insights, our educational programs, our spiritual ideals, our imaginative powers, and our emotional sensitivities. All these can now be seen not only as inadequate, but also as distorted and at the origin of the deteriorating influence that we have on the life systems of the earth.” Thus writes Thomas Berry. (The Dream of the Earth, p. 210) How would our lives be different if human beings were truly seen as merely a part of the natural system, the interdependent web? I think our current ethical system, that places humans about other living things, would change quite radically.

Here is a very important criticism of Christianity – along with a call for change. Traditional Christianity is often perceived, and probably rightly so, as “anti-Judaic, exclusivist, and triumphalist.” (Hodgson, Winds of the Spirit, p. 234) Christians are called to affirm their positive religious experiences, while at the same time not making any judgments as to “whether this revelation surpasses or fulfills other religions.” (Winds, p. 237) Particularly, according to Rosemary Ruether, instead of thinking of Judaism as locked into a permanently archaic stage, “Christianity very much needs a

theology that can affirm its experience of redemption in Christ without negating the Jewish people and its ongoing covenant with God (p. 241) Marcus Borg says “ A major task for Christians in the 21st century is grateful and enthusiastic affirmation of religious pluralism.” (God at 2000, p. 3) Harvey Cox, speaking at the Jesus at 2000 seminar, agrees. “We now live in a period in which the recognition of the presence of the spirit of God in other religious traditions has to be part of our own spiritual mentality and our faith. [We must take steps] toward recognizing a much wider and more fathomless mystery than we often allow.” (Jesus at 2000, p. 103) Perhaps this is good advice for us, as Unitarian Universalist, as well?

When the words of the Bible were written, and when the life and teachings of Jesus were being experienced and analyzed for their meaning, it was a different world. A particular kind of faith was in part necessary to help the people of those times accept the limitations that were essential to their agrarian existence. Conditions have changed. Our understandings have changed. Our limitations are different. Science has brought a whole new world of interdependent connections into the picture. Karen Armstrong writes, “All over the globe, people have been struggling with these new conditions [and new scientific discoveries] and have been forced to reassess their religious traditions, which were designed for an entirely different type of society.” (The Battle for God, p. xiv) About those five fundamental Christian tenets from the early 1900s: John Shelby Spong is adamant that “Today I find each of these fundamentals, as traditionally understood, to be not just naïve, but eminently rejectable.” (A New Christianity for a New World, p. 2)

He is not alone. In many of our Christian (Catholic and Protestant) churches, there are vast numbers of people, and ministers, and theological scholars including divinity school professors (I speak from experience) who do not believe any of the traditional Christian doctrine. I would bet that there are thousands, if not millions, of self-defined Christians who would fit right into these pews, here this morning, and be comfortable with everything we proclaim as Unitarian Universalists. It doesn't make us better that we have made this transition to a different kind of religion earlier than they have, it just makes us earlier.

I have heard some Unitarian Universalists wonder if there will be any need for us when the transitions that are happening within Christianity today come to realization. What will make us different from a Christianity in which God is not a personified supernatural being, but has become the all encompassing spirit or energy of the universe, and Jesus/Christ is not literally God's son, but a symbolic child of the creative and redemptive spirit just as we all are? It is an interesting question.

Christianity is in transition, and so must we be, too.