

Easter: A Basketful of Theological Dilemmas

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Easter, and this has nothing to do with chocolate, is a sticky holiday. To be truthful, the Christian theological meaning of Easter has very little meaning for Unitarian Universalists today. We just are not celebrating Easter in the same way as other churches around us in Amherst are celebrating this morning. Neither are we celebrating the original meaning of the Jewish festival of Passover, which began at sunset this past Wednesday and will continue for a total of eight days.

The major premise of Easter, for Christians, is that Christ, the son of God and without original sin, died so that the rest of humanity could be spared from God's wrath. Jesus atoned for our sins. This is called atonement theology and basically means that Jesus took our place on the cross and received the punishment that we rightly deserve. Jesus is called the redeemer because with his own life he "bought back" salvation and our relationship with God.

Easter is the culmination of the period of the year known as Pentecost, which begins with Advent, the announcement of the coming of Jesus' birth at Christmas, and ends with his crucifixion, death and resurrection.

While Unitarian Universalists do agree that Jesus' enlightened vision for the world, of universal love and compassion, is a salvific vision, we tend to think it was through Jesus' life and words, not his death, and likewise through our lives and not our deaths, that salvation occurs. We think of salvation as understanding, in our lifetimes, not our death times, how to live well and rightly on this earth and with our fellow human beings.

The Jewish celebration of Passover or Pesach has been around much longer than Easter. Originally Passover celebrated the miracle that the angel of death had passed over the houses of the enslaved Hebrew people in Egypt as the rest of the population was being devastated by the last of the legendary 10 plagues. An unblemished young lamb was found, sacrificed, and its blood was smeared on the lintels, or top beam above the doors of the Jewish houses, and by this they were recognized by God and spared the loss of their first born sons. It later became customary for a paschal lamb to be sacrificed and eaten for the Passover feast. Today Passover is celebrated with a Seder dinner and the reading of the Haggadah in a ritual that retells the story of the Exodus, the escape of the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt. The part about the sacrificial lamb is symbolized only by a lamb bone among other symbols on the Seder plate.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus, himself, is often referred to as the paschal lamb or the Lamb of God, unblemished (as without original sin) who was sacrificed to save his people from the wrath of God. The similarities to the Jewish custom are striking. It was a Passover meal that Jesus and his disciples were celebrating at The Last Supper. The wine and bread of the Jewish rituals became the bread and wine, the body and blood, of

Christ in Christian communion. Over time, Judaism and Christianity have found ways to make their celebrations more distinct and their meanings further apart. But that they are related is still quite apparent.

If you grew up Jewish, or still celebrate some of its traditions, did your Passover Seder plate have a hard boiled egg on it? A lamb shank? Did you scour the house, cleaning as you went, looking for that last crumb of leavened bread? Did you drink wine and eat matzos as you read the Haggadah at the Seder dinner?

Or did your day begin with an Easter basket? Did it have colored eggs or candy in the shape of an egg, a bunny or a cross? When you were little, did your mother or grandmother make a big deal out of spring cleaning? What about Easter dinner – did you have Lamb? You may have grown up with some of these traditions even if you do not celebrate in these ways now. Some Unitarian Universalist churches continue to offer a traditional communion service on the Thursday before Easter, called Maundy Thursday, the night that Jesus ate his last Passover supper with his disciples.

Today, we realize that many of the holiday rituals of both Judaism and Christianity were assimilated from other sources entirely. For example, the word Easter is related to the biological word estrus and to the Greek word Oistros, which means “frenzy.” It also is similar to the name of the Norse Goddess Eastre, the goddess of dawn and the renewal of spring and life and to the Germanic goddess Ostara who was also a symbol of fertility. Ostara’s companion was that great example of reproductive prowess, the rabbit. This is beginning to sound like the Easter with which Unitarian Universalists are more comfortable!

Another Easter tradition, the coloring of eggs, was originally an ancient fertility rite in which women would bury red painted eggs along with their hopes for the coming year. When the Christian church came along, the priests did not like this, of course, and would pay children to find and dig up the eggs – the original Easter egg hunt.

We are all well aware, I am sure, of the many legends and stories of the Vernal equinox, legends from thousands of years before the death of Jesus, into which the Christian story of death and resurrection was woven in order that the existing cultures could more easily be converted. Many of them had to do with god or goddesses who descended or died into some kind of darkness for three days before coming back into the light or life again. The theme of resurrection had also been around since well before the time of Jesus. The ancient myth of the Phoenix, a bird that built its own funeral pyre and then arose again from the ashes has been around for over 2200 years in Chinese art and writing. The Phoenix, a bird of high moral values, like Jesus, was a symbol of immortality, resurrection and life after death.

Often, when talking about Easter, a correlation is made between pagan or earth centered festivals celebrating the return of the sun and the Christian story of resurrected life out of Jesus’ death. For me, however, this comparison of nature to something deliberately violent, has always been troublesome.

I am troubled that human beings insist on buying into what Walter Wink calls the “myth of violent redemption,” that good can be accomplished through violence. We can see the effects of this myth in many aspects of our society, including our system of justice, and I believe we have suffered for it greatly. That religion sends a message that violence is an acceptable means to solve our problems has been an integral and damaging aspect of our human history. Couldn't we just leave resurrection to the spring flowers that miraculously arrive out of the cold, death-like winter months?

Jesus died on a cross. For that I am sorry. From what I know, he seems to have been an enlightened person with a wise message for us all. I do not celebrate his death, nor do I feel that the violence surrounding his death made anything right with the world. I celebrate Jesus' life.

What do Unitarian Universalists do with Passover and Easter? The Jewish celebration has been changed over the centuries. It is less explicitly about violence. The words of the Haggadah and the ritual of the Seder meal are now more timeless and relevant in their messages of emergence from oppression, the importance of remembering the past, and in their emphasis on family and children. I find it very meaningful.

Easter does not carry the same relevance, for me, other than in its more secular aspects. There are many within Christianity who are troubled, like I am, by the underlying messages of atonement theology. Unitarian Universalists try to focus on other aspects of the season at Easter, and it does remain a good time to bring our families together.

For me, personally, today is a good time to ponder again the miracles of nature, its cycles – that spring follows winter, always, with hope for renewed life. I celebrate also that I am a part of nature, with the same cycles and urges as all my fellow animals. As I like to say, spring brings a certain purpose to the pairing of the ducks on the pond. Spring is a good time to remind ourselves that we are natural too.

Enjoy this miracle called life.

I hope your day is a happy one.