

The Baby with the Bathwater:
Celebrating the Humanitarian Jesus
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As you might imagine, I spend quite a bit of my time researching serious scholarly materials in order to prepare my sermons. For instance, this article, which begins: "Scholars have long debated the exact ethnicity and nationality of Jesus. Recently, at a theological meeting in Rome, scholars held a heated debate on this matter. One by one, they offered their evidence."

It began - "Three proofs that JESUS WAS JEWISH (which he, in fact, was). 1. He went into his father's business. 2. He lived at home until he was 33. 3. He was sure his mother was a virgin, and she was sure he was God. But then evidence was offered that JESUS WAS A CALIFORNIAN: 1. He never cut his hair. 2. He walked around barefoot. 3. He started a new religion.

But perhaps the most compelling argument --THREE PROOFS THAT JESUS WAS A WOMAN: 1. He had to feed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was no food. 2. He kept trying to get the message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it. 3. Even when he was dead, he had to get up because there was more work for him to do!"

It is often said that all jokes contain some realistic half-truths. In this case, some eye-popping un-PC stereotypes, too. In reality, we do hold so many different, subjective concepts about the mythic man whose birthday we've come to celebrate on December 25th (not coincidentally, by the way, around the time of the pagan Solstice and the Roman festival of Saturnalia).

We've learned through several centuries of scholarship that there isn't a whole heck of a lot that we can factually claim about this admirable person. As a result, the question that Jesus asked his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew: "*Who do you say that I am*" offers us an even more incisive and complex quandary today than it did back then.

And, though we chuckle (perhaps uncomfortably) at the jokes, this quandary may resonate for us as Unitarian Universalists grappling with whether we are entitled to celebrate, admire, and even love the babe who grew into that man, if we've chosen along the way to pour off the filmy bathwater of Christian doctrine in which that babe has soaked for two millennia.

We may wonder how such an enterprise is worthwhile to us spiritually if we don't "believe" in the Divine Christ anymore. Or, we may find *any* relationship with Jesus subversive, embarrassing, or downright unsophisticated. As the writer Annie Lamott

expressed, prior to having a bona fide conversion experience, “Jesus made about as much sense to me as Scientology or dowsing. And, besides, what would my progressive friends think?”

Our religious backgrounds or theologies notwithstanding, I ask you to consider this question with me today: Should we, and how can we, claim or reclaim the *human* Jesus on our own terms as Unitarian Universalists?

First off, I’m well aware of the taboo around the “J” word in many UU churches and the pain from which this sensitivity arises. Somehow, along the way, the babe in the manger, all tender and mild, got mixed up with some harsh doctrines about sin and suffering that made Jesus about as palatable to some of us as Aunt Ida’s holiday fruitcake.

One of my colleagues has been pressured for years, by former Jews and former Christian alike, to avoid the “J” word at all costs, even on Easter and Christmas. That seems to me like ignoring a very big pink elephant on the chancel. We have a Christian past in this religion and the deliberate theological shift from the divinity of Christ to the humanity of Jesus represents a fascinating era in our denominational history. We’ll delve into that a bit later.

Getting back to the “taboo” issue. My colleague Marilyn Sewall recalls her entry, as a former Catholic, into Unitarian Universalism. She was excited about UUism, but she wondered whether she could bring the human Jesus (not the divine Christ) with her into this new creedless faith “One Sunday as I was leading worship,” Sewall recalls, “I mentioned Jesus. I read from the Bible. And some people were upset. I was surprised. We could read from the Tao Te Ching and from Native American myth, offer Zen koans and obscure chants, but for whatever reason, some people couldn’t handle Jesus.” “I understand that now,” Sewall continues.

“Some of us have left the churches of our childhood because of what those churches did with Jesus, and so any mention of him brings up pain and discomfort. I understand that, but I’m not willing to give Jesus away to the fundamentalists, just like I’m unwilling to give the Bible away or the flag. Jesus remains a figure of immense power and persuasion, arguably the most influential figure of Western civilization.”

On the flip side, speaking for myself as one who had moved away from the theology of Judaism (my birth religion), I had wondered whether I was allowed to know Jesus *at all, on any terms*; or worse, whether he might be shoved down my throat by a predominantly Christian society.

The Jewish culture in which I was raised avoided the “J word” or spoke it in whispers. I learned nothing substantial about him in my childhood except that he had once been a Jew (our claim to fame!) and that people like Nazis and anti-Zionists believed in him. A limited and distorted perspective, I admit. Then, I married a former Catholic and ultimately attended Divinity School, where I read the entire New Testament for the first time in my life.

What an eye opener. First of all, I learned Jesus had not *converted* to Christianity, because such a thing did not exist during his lifetime, and that he never claimed that he had died for anyone's sins. His name was Joshua ben Joseph (Christ was not his family name!). He came to modernize the religion of his ancestry, Judaism, not to abolish it. In fact, some pundits refer to him as the first "Reform Rabbi."

He was a prophet like Elijah, and most likely, Jesus too would have liked to have stood on the rock where his forefather Moses stood. Yes, he was a compassionate healer and he was an almost Zen-like sage. Yet, he squarely confronted injustice and hypocrisy among the ruling Pharisees, and he consorted with supposed riff-raff. He was a zealous rabble-rouser who walked the talk, even though it ultimately cost him his life. My kind of rebel.

For centuries, Jesus was viewed solely through a lens of pure faith. The Bible was considered the revealed word of God, not subject to scholarly debate or conjecture unless you wanted to lose your head or be burned at the stake like Unitarian martyr, Frances David.

With the advent, in the early 1800's, of the historical/critical method of Biblical scholarship, folks like the famed Rudolph Bultmann began to openly dissect the Jesus figure, the Gospels, and other aspects of the New Testament. Albert Schweitzer and others followed with their own quests for the historical Jesus.

You may not know (and may not have learned in CCD) that the first Gospel wasn't written down until 90 years after Jesus' death, or that Paul's first letter wasn't composed until 60 years after the crucifixion. You may never have heard of the Gospel of Thomas or the source known as "Q," both of which contain many of the sayings or aphorisms attributed to Jesus, and yet were not included in the Bible canon. Politics, most likely,

As a result, one can easily speculate that the stories about Jesus or attributed to him were embellished over that time as they traveled via oral tradition throughout the region.

For decades, a group of prominent modern scholars have met for a yearly symposium called the Jesus Seminar in which they vote, using a colored bead system, on what can be considered factual about Jesus. As one of them surmised: "Trying to find the actual Jesus is like trying, in atomic physics, to locate a submicroscopic particle and determine its charge. Results can never claim more than probability."

Consequently, the scholars can agree on precious little -- that Jesus was a Jew, probably born in Bethlehem and that he likely conducted a three year ministry in Galilee. Furthermore, there is mostly agreement that he was crucified in Jerusalem because he was considered as threat to the status quo, not because he was a gentle shepherd or a comforter of the afflicted. That's about it in a nutshell. The miracles, the parables, the Sermon on the Mount? - it's anybody's guess.

Thomas Jefferson, a closeted Unitarian, undertook a similar quest for the authentic Jesus when he composed the Jefferson Bible, a cut-and-paste job of the elements of the

New Testament that he felt could be reasonably believed. More recently, the writer Stephen Mitchell took another stab at this biblical editing in his book, "The Gospel According to Jesus." Mitchell discovered, as Jefferson did, that "when the accretions are recognized and stripped off, Jesus vividly appears in his radiance. Like the man in Bunyan's riddle, the more we throw away, the more we have."

Interestingly, this exercise has impacted in unexpected ways on some of these scholars, including those who came into the process with a strong religious devotion to the Jesus of faith. Unbeknownst to them, the following question would come more and more prominently into focus:

Does it really matter whether Jesus was who people said he was, or can we admire him solely as a good man who taught simple truths about living in the world? In other words, might it not be possible, and perhaps even preferable, especially to us UUs, to keep the baby even as we drain out the bathwater?

I like what Marcus Borg, one of the Jesus Seminar scholars, has to say in response to this question. Borg sees the historical Jesus as a man who was grounded in the Spirit, whose experience of the Mystery was central to his life and was the source of his power, wisdom and courage. "In every culture, in every era, there are people of the spirit," says Borg. "They may be shamans or warriors or healers – but what they have in common is that they are conduits for the holy, for simple sacred wisdom."

Some, among you, left your branch of Christianity when you grew into young adults and wanted to grow spiritually through questioning, but were reprimanded, threatened with damnation, or expelled. Jesus, the most famous come-outer of all time, didn't fare too well with the old guard Pharisees himself, did he? Yet, his embodiment of the inquiring mind is not typically celebrated in the Church, is it?

On a blog I read regularly, I found this story about a Christian pastor who was presenting a Time for All Ages about the value of a work ethic. He started, "I'm going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is." The children nodded eagerly.

"This thing lives in trees (pause) and eats nuts (pause)..." No hands went up. "And it is gray (pause) and has a long bushy tail (pause)..." The children were looking at each other nervously, but still no hands raised.

"It jumps from branch to branch (pause) and chatters and flips its tail when it's excited (pause)..."

Finally one little boy tentatively raised his hand. The pastor quickly called on him. "Well," said the boy, "I *know* the answer must be 'Jesus' ... but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me!"

In Unitarian Universalism, we call a squirrel and squirrel...that's a fact, not an opinion, after all. And this religion, at its heart and soul, values curiosity over certainty about all matters spiritual, including how we contextualize Jesus.

This notion resonated for two of our Unitarian prophets, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. Their famous 19th century sermons on this topic offer us a jumping off point for how we UUs came to embrace the human Jesus as we progressively let go of the Divine Christ as a primary element of our religious identity.

This process happened gradually over the centuries, but it picked up speed in the 1800s when the Humanity of Jesus/Divinity of Christ argument dominated the liberal Christian theological arena. As I previously mentioned, scholars and ministers began dissecting historical evidence (or the lack thereof) about Jesus (the baby) as they offered new insights about Christian doctrine (what they came to regard as the bathwater).

Emerson stepped up first in 1831 with his famous Divinity School address in which he claimed that Jesus proclaimed not his own divinity, but that of the human soul. Though Jesus spoke of miracles, he meant only that all life is a miracle. And when the writers of Scripture claimed to be inspired of God, their meaning was simply that all men are inspired.

The Christian Church, in Emerson's view, had not only fostered false and redundant doctrines, but had also neglected to preach Christ's real message, namely man's direct access to the spiritual laws. Controversy ensued.

One of Emerson's staunchest defenders was fellow Unitarian minister and transcendentalist Theodore Parker, who found himself embroiled in his own mess over his 1841 sermon The Transient and Permanent in Christianity.

In this "radical" address, spoken before Unitarians and invited orthodox clergy, Parker preached that the religion of Jesus is permanent; the creeds and customs of the church are transient. Parker regarded Christ as a human being, though a religious genius and supreme teacher, who taught some error but also taught Absolute Religion.

The response to Parker from the orthodox clergy was predictably harsh, and they insisted that liberals either accept or disavow this strange new theology. He was kicked out of the club and labeled a heretic and a "blasphemer." As Parker was pushed further and further outside the circle of Boston Unitarianism, he came to criticize the denomination for betraying the very principles set forth by classical Unitarians such as W.E. Channing, most notably religious freedom. He prevailed in the end, though, attracting more than 2000 people to the Sunday Lyceums he set up after his expulsion.

Part of acting out that freedom today as Unitarian Universalists is a recognition that we are entitled to intentionally reclaim aspects of our religious pasts or nuggets of spiritual wisdom that move us forward or deeper in our free and responsible searches for truth and meaning. And, that includes embracing the figure of Jesus or his teachings, just as it includes practicing Buddhist meditation or celebrating Ramadan or Hanukkah. We may not *choose* to do this, but we should know that we are *allowed*. We can encourage our children to befriend Jesus, even as we explain our views about the various doctrines that grew up around him.

I remember taking our son, Sam, this little Jewish/Catholic mongrel to the Paulist Center for Easter when he was around 4-years-old. We had already given him the skinny on our views about Jesus, so it came as no surprise when he turned, pointed at the statue in the corner and proclaimed at the top of his lungs: “ Hey, that nice man Jesus is in the corner!” (over and over again) As embarrassed as I was, I felt pleased that Sam could identify Jesus as a decent person first, wholly human.

In the end, it may matter very little in this hurting world whom we think Jesus *became*. I know it matters little to me. What will and does matter is what Jesus represents and embodies as a wholly human man with a strong dose of the divine spark inherent in each of us. It may matter less whether he was a ransom for many in the hereafter and more that he is a role model for all humankind in the here and now. “What Would Jesus Do?” That is meant to be a question about a person, not a doctrine.

It may not amount to a hill of beans whether he walked on water, but rather that he walked rightly on earth and amongst people. It may be less important whether his Gospel is true than it is that his story may inspire us to live personal Gospels of which we can be proud. Each one of us is a promising babe, grown up. One-time holy babes, now flossing and watching our weight, but nonetheless divine.” (Jane Rzepka) Let’s not give Jesus away to the fundamentalists, or pour him down the drain of our religious pasts with the bathwater of what has hurt us, threatened us, or left us cold.

In your own spiritual life and on your unique path, what will ultimately matter is who Jesus, or any other avatar of the holy, is to you *personally*. Maybe nothing, maybe a Savior, maybe a compelling myth, maybe an embarrassment, maybe a painful memory still. Maybe someone new in your life or someone you thought you understood but have come to see more clearly as the bathwater drains away.

In any case, they say its his birthday 10 days hence, so let us sing and rejoice, celebrate his gifts of love, compassion and justice, help to blow out more than 2000 candles, and then kindle dozens more against the darkness. Emmanuel has come within as light to dwell. We are *all* the light of the world.

Blessed be. Blessed we. Amen.

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