

What Is Christianity, Who Gets to Decide, and Who Cares?
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April 23, 2017

Have you been asked, “Are you a Christian?” Do you know how to answer the question? Does the question make you feel uneasy? Have you asked *yourself*, “Am I a Christian?” Have you been asked “Are Unitarian Universalists Christians?” or “Is Unitarian Universalism part of Christianity?” Do you have answers that you feel comfortable with?

I know that many Unitarian Universalists respond without hesitation, “No, I’m not a Christian” or “Yes, of course, I’m a Christian.” Or they may respond, “Unitarian Universalism is right on the edge of Christianity, partly in, partly out – and that’s just the way I like it.”

If you cannot answer so easily or so confidently, here’s a good way to reply: “Tell me, what exactly do you mean by Christianity?” – that is always a good response.

I remember several years ago, when the Rev. Kerry Mueller was the minister for the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Carroll County, Maryland. She wanted to attend meetings of the Carroll County Ministerium. She wanted to be connected to the other clergy in the area, to discuss mutual concerns, to share mutual problems. Some of the more theologically conservative or narrow members of the ministerium felt uncomfortable having a Unitarian Universalist in their midst, but they were not sure on what basis they could exclude her.

The solution they came up – they thought they were so clever! – their solution was to have a committee prepare a statement of Christian belief, a creedal statement. Membership eligibility would be based on agreement with the creed. Their expectation was, that all of them, the current members, they would all agree to the statement. But Kerry – the Unitarian Universalist, the heretic! – they knew that she would not. The committee drafted the statement and brought it back to the meeting the next month.

And then they discovered the problem. It was too narrow. Some of the obviously Christian ministers couldn’t go along with it.

This story, this incident, introduces us to my three questions: What Is Christianity? Who Gets to Decide? and Who Cares?

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To consider the third question first, I can think of a number of reasons why we might care – why we might care about what Christianity is, and who gets to say.

(1) First, wherever we Unitarian Universalists may now be with respect to Christianity, the roots, the origins of both Unitarianism and Universalism are in Christianity, in Protestant Christianity in particular, in the Reformation. Indeed, our roots go back much further: to the

earliest centuries of Christianity, before what counted as orthodoxy was settled. I would not have us discard these roots; I would not have us abandon our heritage. Indeed, I do not think we could free ourselves from our history even if we tried.

(2) Second, many Unitarian Universalists identify themselves as Christians. Christianity – on the theological left end of Protestantism, Christianity of the social gospel tradition – Christianity is alive and well and unapologetic among us.

My great grandfather was a Presbyterian minister: the Rev. Herbert Erastus Davis. During the concluding decades of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th century, he served churches in three different small towns in Michigan, from the northernmost part of the U.P. to the southern edge of the state. I wish I had copies of his sermons. I wonder – was there any overlap in what we preached? Were there hints of my theological and social liberalism in his messages? In any event, for me, he is a reminder of my Christian heritage. I hope, I trust, that he would be proud of me.

Our churches, in my view, should be no less welcoming to Christianity and Christians than they are to humanists and others of different theological allegiances and shadings.

(3) The third reason we care about what Christianity is, is that many of our national leaders claim that they are guided by their Christian beliefs and values. I'm told that our current president claims to be a Christian, a Presbyterian, apparently, though I've seen no evidence of that. Former President Obama is a Christian, not a Muslim. But my response when someone suggests that Mr. Obama might be a Muslim is, "so what if he were?" President George W. Bush – another Christian, his Christianity was quite different from Mr. Obama's. And if, today, we had a President Romney, many would be asking, "just how big a tent is Christianity? Where does Mormonism fit in?" I am willing to enter the debate about what Christianity is and what it should be.

Christianity is not owned by denominations or church leaders who are socially or theologically narrow-minded. Let's not let them set the agenda. Let's not let them define our nation's values. Let's not let them represent us before the court of world opinion. Let us not give in to a narrow, illiberal, understanding of Christianity.

Those who restrict other people's access to contraception and abortion claim the sanctity of life as the highest value, apparently as the only value. Where is their compassion for the poor in this country, for those without medical insurance? Where is their compassion for the women who will inevitably seek a way to terminate an unwanted pregnancy anyway? – but what kind of way will they find? Where is their compassion for the children born into poverty or neglect? We need a different vision.

And then there are the self-proclaimed Christians who see love and affection toward someone of one's own sex as an unforgivable sin. Gays and Lesbians, in their constricted view, are beyond the pale, are beyond communion, or, at best, they are second class citizens, to be tolerated but not encouraged. Is this the message of Jesus? Is this the command of the God of

love that our Universalist forbears found in their Bible and in their hearts? We need a different vision.

These are some of the reasons why, in my opinion, we should care about what Christianity is and who gets to decide: our roots are in Christianity; Christianity is alive among us, us Unitarian Universalists, and the health and future of our nation depend, to a great extent, on what vision of Christianity is dominant among us, us citizens of the United States.

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That's my answer to my third question, "Why do we care what Christianity is?". I'll give you a very short answer to the second question, "Who gets to decide?" *I* get to decide. Of course, others get to decide, too. But for now it's my turn. Here is my understanding of Christianity. Here is my list of the ten features for a Christianity that deserves to thrive in the 21st century, for a Christianity with which Unitarian Universalists can identify. I offer you my ten points for a renewed Christianity.

1. **Inclusion.** The hymn we started with this morning, "Welcome Table"? (*Singing the Living Tradition* #407) It's about being welcoming, welcoming to everyone – "Come on in!" Rich or poor, black or white, gay or straight, you're all welcome at God's table. Whether you are part of God's family does not depend on your position on technical theological issues, or on creedal statements that don't make sense, or on statements whose truth cannot be determined. When Jesus was asked what one must do to inherit eternal life, he did not talk about subscribing to an implausible creed, he said simply, love God and love your neighbor. (Luke 10:27)

2. **Reason.** "The truth will make you free." (John 8:32) The author of the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel According to John, gives these words to Jesus: "the truth will make you free." Christianity has a long tradition of looking for the truth, a tradition of intellectual exploration, a tradition of using reason. That tradition, in the early centuries, led some to conclude that Jesus must have been *more* than what he was described as being in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. That tradition, in recent centuries, has led to the critical examination of the Bible, and to the reinterpretation of traditional doctrines.

3. **Heritage.** It would be hard to imagine Christianity without its history, without its heritage, without its varied traditions. It would be hard to imagine Christianity without congregations, without worship. But the desire to hold on to the accumulated inheritance of two thousand years should not blind us to the fact that the church has been a fallible, flawed, human institution, that it has done terrible things over the centuries.

On balance, Christianity has probably been a force for good, but who knows? For better or worse, the Christianity of today and the Christianity of tomorrow are part of that historical stream. Whatever its past, may Christianity be a force for good in the future.

4. **The Way (It's Not Exclusive).** While, in the past, Christians may have seen Christianity as the unique religion, as the sole source of salvation, these notions have by now

been abandoned by many. Christianity provides *a* way to see the world. It is a source of vocabulary and ideas, but it is not the only path.

5. **Flexibility.** Christianity is big enough, flexible enough, to hold on to all of its history, to encompass those with very different views and practices, even contradictory views and practices. It is a big tent. One of the keys to its survival has been its ability to adapt to local cultures. Another key to the survival of Christianity has been its capacity, over the centuries, for change, its capacity for renewal, for rebirth, for reformation. Christianity has survived Copernicus and Darwin. It has recovered from the challenges of Marx and Hitler.

6. **The Bible.** The Bible is a source, but a source more of questions than of answers. We can learn from its stories. It provides people all over the world with a common heritage, with a common vocabulary. In the 19th century the study of the Bible as a book, as a human artifact, began in earnest. Christianity has been enriched by that critical study. Christianity is enriched when the Bible is understood as the work of human authors, as a human collection, a human institution. But the Bible is hardly a substitute for thought or moral reflection. We still need reason, experience, and tradition. If you could take only one book to your desert island, you might well choose the Bible. Thankfully, we're not forced to make that choice. We can benefit from whole libraries of books, from Barnes & Noble, and Amazon.com, and the public library, too.

7. **Jesus.** Where would Christianity be without Jesus? He was a teacher, prophet, healer, a religious reformer. Jesus confronted the affluent and inspired the poor. He was a challenge both to the Roman authorities and to the conservative leaders of the Judaism of his day. The Jewish leaders were cautiously trying to appease their Roman rulers without upsetting their Jewish constituency, cautiously trying to keep the resentment of their people within bounds, to spare them the wrath of the Romans. The Romans had demonstrated their willingness to crucify thousands at a time. What was one more Jewish victim to them? Jesus, the man of peace, became Jesus, the victim.

But the story of Jesus did not end with his death. He lives on as symbol and metaphor. He is the inspiring though impossible role model. He is the faithful, reliable comforter. He is the friend who sees all our faults and accepts us as we are.

8. **God.** Can an atheist be a Christian? Or can a Christian be an atheist? Of course they can! That may be too abrupt. Concepts of God change. Only in a metaphorical way would we accept the anthropomorphic God found in the book of Genesis. We are thankful that the tribal God who champions the Hebrew people in the Book of Joshua is superseded by a more compassionate God, concerned with all of humanity. A God who would authorize the death of Job's children as part of a poorly designed experiment in human behavior (Job 1:18-19) or a God who would order the death of Abraham and Sarah's son (Genesis 22:1-19), or a God who could find no better way to communicate with humanity than to sacrifice his own son – such a God, for me, is morally incomprehensible.

But a God who satisfies our rigorous intellectual standards – a God who personifies mystery, who symbolizes the unknown and unknowable, a creator God whose role ended with the writing of the laws of physics and the igniting of the Big Bang – such a God fails to meet our emotional needs. Christianity brings to us the idea of a God who suffers with us. Such a God doesn't get involved in miraculous interventions but is with us in our time of need, if we are able to set aside our rational defenses and indulge our imaginations.

9. **Humanity.** One strain within Christianity, coming from St. Augustine, through John Calvin, viewed humanity as evil. We were doomed by Adam's supposed mistake in judgment. Those in the late 18th and early 19th centuries who would become known as Unitarians rejected this view. While they knew as well as anyone what scoundrels we can be, they chose to emphasize the inherent goodness of humanity.

As their descendants, we affirm, in our principles, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

This favorable view of humanity can be symbolized by the story of Jesus. God enters the world, enters humanity through the helpless baby. Jesus here is any baby. We humans thus have divinity within us. Let us recognize the divinity within ourselves – and the divinity within our neighbors.

10. **Death.** For many, Christianity has been viewed instrumentally, as a tool, a means. Through Christianity we are permitted to escape death, to conquer death. And to avoid hell, as well. We need to leave behind this reason for subscribing to Christianity. We understand that death is part of life, a necessary part of life.

Our Universalist forbears, a couple of hundred years ago, came to recognize that the God they found in the Bible, the God that their reason and moral sensibilities revealed to them, was a God of love. A God of love, they proclaimed, would not commit anyone to eternal hellfire. They preached that all souls are ultimately reconciled to God.

After Darwin and Freud, many of us find the whole idea of life after death inherently implausible. Even if we are unwilling to go quite that far, even if we leave open the possibility of life beyond the grave, I would find it hard to make any claims about what might await us across that final river, or how best to get there.

In any event, the focus of Christianity today must be on our here-and-now world, and on the world that our grandchildren will inherit. Let us be guided by our “respect for the interdependent web of all existence,” and let us recognize that we are only a *part* of that interdependent web.

We can, I hope, find inspiration in Jesus's image of the kingdom of God, which we understand as the realm of peace and justice and sustainability – the realm of peace, justice and sustainability in *this* world. We understand that we will not attain this realm through the second coming of Christ, but through the hard work of humanity.

There you have it, my reconstruction of Christianity. It's a Christianity that, I believe, is a theologically, intellectually, and morally acceptable and realistic option for Unitarian Universalists today.

But before we conclude, let's take a quick look at the Negro spiritual "Lord, I want to be a Christian, in my heart, in my heart." What does it mean, according to this, to be a Christian? Here is what the remaining verses tell us: "I want to be more loving," "I want to be more holy," and "I want to be like Jesus." There's nothing about creeds, there's nothing about the Trinity, there's nothing about original sin. But there is an emphasis on love, there's an aspiration to holiness, and there is a desire to follow the example of Jesus.