

Six Sources: Part 4

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Today is Part 4 of our sermon series examining the 6 Sources of our Unitarian Universalist faith. This morning we will be focusing on: “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.”

What is the relationship between current-day UUism and Christianity?

Ask this question to 5 different UUs, you will get 6 different answers.

This topic is one of the most emotional and divisive subjects in our faith. And folks who are relatively new to UUism may not understand the source of all this angst. So I will attempt to explain just how we got here.

Let me begin by recognizing that we have in our church family here at UUCJ a diversity of individual “viewpoints-about” and “relationships-to” Christianity. We have several folks who identify as Christian UU, just as we have several folks who identify as Buddhist UU’s and Jewish UU’s. Now in addition to Christian UUs, we also have several folks in our church family who *left* Christianity because they were at one time significantly harmed by Christianity—that is to say, harmed by a specific Christian church, or Christian minister, or Christian doctrine—doctrines, for example, that punished independent thought.... that perpetuated racism or sexism... that declared LGBTQ folks reprobate sinners worthy of spending an eternity in hell. In some instances, the harm caused by Christian institutions was so substantial, it caused legitimate trauma.

For decades, UU churches were one of the only viable alternatives for traumatized ex-Christians in this country seeking a values-based community. Not surprisingly, in a lot of these UU Churches, where tremendous theological and ideological diversity flourished, a common bond that served to bring the people together—a glue that helped these disparate congregants cohere—was a shared disdain of the religion that had hurt so many of them. In some of our congregations, this condescension toward Christianity became such a dominant part of the church’s culture, self-identifying Christian UUs were themselves marginalized. They suffered insults, like being called “intellectually inferior,” or “not as spiritually evolved” as the humanists of the congregation. And as a result, many Christian UUs, feeling unwelcomed, left our faith and never came back.

It is a tragic truth that hurt-people hurt people.

And so this question about the nature of the relationship between Christianity and UUism is not simply academic. It is a *deeply* personal question with profound emotional entanglements.

And I'm going to wade into all of that this morning. I am going to attempt to provide *some* context regarding the historical relationships between Judaism, Christianity, Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism. And then I will offer my own two cents about how to conceptualize our current relationship to Christianity. I plan to tread lightly... but the fact is, I'm probably going to say some things today that many of you will vehemently disagree with, or at the very least, will rub you the wrong way. Please know that whatever I say, I still love you. And hopefully you will still love me. As Transylvanian Unitarian Bishop Francis David purportedly once said, "We need not think alike, to love alike."

So what's going to happen next is, I'm going to cover about 4000 years' worth of religious history in... *10 minutes*. Corners will be cut. Be warned.

So... Judaism happens. It exists for like nearly 2000 years. And then this guy named Jesus of Nazareth, aka "Jesus Christ," shows up. (Maybe). Jesus practiced Judaism. He was a Jewish rabbi who was trying to reform the religion of his day. Then Jesus Christ died. (Now what happened to Jesus *after* he died is NOT part of our conversation— *that* topic will be addressed in a few weeks on Easter... until then, it's a cliffhanger). Following his death, Jesus Christ's followers, most of whom were practicing Jews as well, decided to call themselves "Christians," which simply means "little Christs."

Now let's pause a moment to understand what it meant to be a Christian back in the earliest days. When the term "Christian" first came into existence, it was a super-broad term denoting a huge diversity of beliefs about Jesus. When Christians first started calling themselves Christians, they didn't really *know* what they all believed. *Was Jesus God?* An official answer to that question wasn't made until the Council of Nicea, which was still 300 years away. *Was there a trinity with the Holy Spirit being co-equal with God the Father and God the Son?* That conclusion came nearly 50 years after Nicea. For the first 300 years of the Christian church—which is a long time—longer than the United States has been a nation—for the first 300 years of Christianity, there was no established orthodoxy. So there was *tremendous* diversity of belief among the early Christians. Some Christians believed that Jesus was God. Some didn't. Some believed in a trinity. Some didn't. Some believed Jesus physically rose from the dead. Some didn't. Yet they were all called "Christians."

And around this time too, many Christians decided that they were no longer really a part of Judaism. Remember, in the beginning, Christianity was a Jewish sect. But eventually, the Christians felt they had outgrown Judaism. Christianity broke away from Judaism because it saw Jesus Christ as both the end of one religious dispensation and the beginning of a new one... But also, because non-Jewish male converts to Christianity didn't want to be circumcised as adults. That was a huge part of it, too. And so rather than cutting their penises, they all started their own religion. However, Christianity obviously still had—and *has*—a close relationship to Judaism. Christianity was born out of Judaism. Jesus—the leader guy of Christianity—was a practicing Jew. The Jewish Holy Scriptures were still considered Holy. Nothing changed there. Jesus—per Christianity—didn't *nullify* the previous divine revelation belonging to the Jews; he *fulfilled* it. In this way, it would be fair to call Christianity a "*trans-Judaic*" faith. "Trans" is a Latin prefix which means "to

go through” or “to go beyond.” Christianity went *through* Judaism and came out the other side as the logical end, the ultimate conclusion, of Judaism—at least that’s what many Christians would claim.

Jews, of course, will rightly argue over that point.

Now fast forward to the 4th Century CE. The United States of America—I mean the Roman Empire—has co-opted Christianity, seeking to turn it into the official state religion and use it as a form of social-control of the people. Rome compels the Christian church to get its act together and create an official set of orthodox beliefs. A *lot* of arguing among the individual Christian churches ensues. Much blood is shed. Literally. Christians were literally killing other Christians during this time because Rome was forcing them to settle on a single theology. Finally, over many years, an orthodox Christian theology eventually settles in. This orthodoxy recognized Jesus as God. It recognized a Holy Trinity. It declared that Jesus physically and literally rose from the dead. It established doctrines of literal heaven and literal hell, etc.

But. There were always Christians in those days who refused to accept these orthodox doctrines. For example, those Christians who didn’t believe in the trinity—who believed Jesus was not divine and did not therefore split the *unity* of God—these Christians came to be known as “Unitarians.” They were labeled heretics. But they still followed Jesus, even if the Christians in power at the time disowned them. Then there were other Christians who accepted Jesus’ divinity, and the Trinity, but took issue with the idea that a perfect, all-loving God could send billions of souls to suffer torment in a literal and eternal hell. These Christians believed the love of God was too powerful, too all-encompassing, to be defeated or undermined by sin or hell a devil. These Christians believed that in the end, *all* God’s children, *universally*, would return to God. These Christians were called “Universalists.” And they were also labeled as heretics by the orthodoxy of the day. But they still followed the teachings of Christ as they understood them.

Even though they were violently suppressed by the ruling orthodox Christians, these heretical doctrines of Unitarian Christianity and Universalist Christianity kept popping up all over the Christian world for nearly 2000 years. And each doctrine, Unitarianism *and* Universalism, showed up independently of one another in the early days of America. So from the beginning of the United States as a nation, a form of American Christian Unitarianism has existed, and a form of American Christian Universalism has existed.

So American Unitarianism and American Universalism existed in the same country for a couple hundred years. And then in 1961, they decided to join forces. They got married. And instead of taking one name—they’re very modern; it’s the 60s—they decide to hyphenate their name, without the hyphen. And thus is born the Unitarian Universalist Association. UUism is now a thing.

So back in 1961... *was Unitarian Universalism still a Christian religion?*

The thing is, both American Unitarians and American Universalists had been consciously moving away from their respective Christian identities for some time up to that point. The Christianity that had won the day here in America in the 20th century—much like the Christianity that won the day in Rome nearly 2000 years before—was a particularly narrowly-defined and oppressive faith-system whose values stood in opposition to the values of both the Unitarians *and* the Universalists. So when the U's and U's first got together in America in 1961, our UUA's first President, the Rev. Dana Greeley, announced that Unitarian-Universalism was a "Post-Christian" religion.

I have said this before and I'll say it again this morning: I don't *exactly* agree. Rather than calling us a "**post**-Christian" faith, I would call us a "**trans**-Christian" faith. Much like Christianity is a "trans-Judaic" faith. UUism went *through* Christianity and came out the other side as something else. Even though we are a different creature now—much like Christianity is a different creature from Judaism—we nevertheless still bear the cultural and theological DNA of our Mother Faith, Christianity, and our Grandmother Faith, Judaism. As the Jewish sacred texts are still viewed as sacred by Christians, we UUs still hold as especially valuable—if not sacred—the Christian texts we inherited from Mom. And that is explicitly spelled out for us in our 4th source.

Last week we visited our 3rd Source: wisdom from the world's religions. Palestine—where Christianity and Judaism were both born—is a part of the world. So theoretically, Judaism and Christianity are already covered by our 3rd Source. So why then are they singled out and lifted up for special recognition by a 4th Source? Because they are, in fact, *special*. To us, at least. They share a historically different relationship to us—a more proximate relationship—than other faith traditions from across the world. Christianity has shaped our theology, our culture, our polity, our liturgy, and our language in countless ways. All our early Unitarian and Universalist leaders, including the Transcendentalists, were Christians. If you were to try to strip away every vestige of Christianity from UUism today, I'm honestly not sure what you would have left.

Moreover, our 4th source isn't just a museum exhibit. It's not simply a respectful nod to our historical roots. The 4th Source is in the present tense, just like all the other sources. Jewish and Christian teachings are meant to be a source of our faith *in the here and now*—still accessed and still applied to our faith today—just like our other 5 sources. And as part of our Unitarian Universalist Associational Covenant, this congregation, UUCJ, has promised, along with over a thousand other UU congregations across the UUA, to recognize and uphold these Jewish and Christian teachings as a valid source of our faith.

But to be clear, with all that said, even using the broadest definition of the word Christian, UUism is not a Christian faith or a Christian denomination. That's because no UU is *compelled* or *required* to follow the teachings of Christ in order to be a UU. One could think that Jesus Christ was lousy—a total jerk-wad—and still be a totally legit Unitarian Universalist.

The better question to ask is: Can a UU also be a Christian? And the answer to that question is a resounding "yes." Theological freedom is at the center of who we are as a people. The liberty to be a free-thinking heretic opposed to the orthodoxy of the powers that-be is what we're all about. It's kind of our thing. So if in your theological freedom...

on your quest for truth and meaning... you decide Jesus is where it's at.... Cool. There are today Christian Unitarian Universalists just as there are today Messianic Jews (that is, Christians who also practice Judaism, or to flip it the other way, Jews who practice Christianity).

But what makes this situation work for us—what makes it tenable to have both Christian UUs and non-Christian UUs knit together into a single-beloved community—is the broadness of our understanding of the term “Christian.” We have to think of that term as having the same kind of broadness that it had in the first 300 years of Christianity’s existence. Indeed, thanks to the Protestant Reformation, the term “Christian” is more diverse than ever. There are over 2 billion self-identified Christians in the world. And according to the U.N. there are somewhere between 30,000 and 45,000 different denominations or varieties of Christianity in the world today.

So if I meet a stranger on the street and they reveal to me that they are a Christian... I have *no idea* what that means. I simply don't know what they believe about anything. They might be a bigot from Fred Phelps' clan. Or they might be one of the Christians who stood next to me in city council chambers last year demanding that Jacksonville recognize the legal rights of the LGBTQ community. I have no way of telling. To *presume* that a self-identified Christian is a fundamentalistic, anti-LGBTQ, anti-science, racist is a form of stereotyping and religious profiling. Like learning someone is Muslim, and then assuming they are a terrorist.

All that said, I must also recognize that giving every Christian the benefit of the doubt might be exceptionally difficult for people who have literally been terrorized by people claiming to follow Christ. And that very rational fear, born from lived experience, certainly explains, if not justifies, the hesitancy to yoke oneself to anything or anyone calling itself Christian. 4th Source be damned.

But again, here is an example of why it pays to read the instructions all the way to the end. Our 4th source is not an opening for the teachings of *all* 45,000 different varieties of Christianity. There is a restrictive clause in that 4th Source. We are bound by covenant only to accept those Jewish and Christian teachings **which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.**

Any Christian doctrine, regardless of how many Biblical proof texts you prop it up with, that calls you to treat someone as inferior, or like a second-class citizen, is categorically unacceptable. Such hate has no place in our faith.

If you come in here claiming to be a Christian and saying that God hates gay or trans folks, or that they are especially deserving of hell, I will be the first to show you the door. Because that belief is **not** compatible with Unitarian Universalism. I will gladly and proudly tell you that UUism is *not* the faith for you. Now, if you go and work all that crap out and repent of that nonsense, I'll be the first to embrace you and welcome you back with open arms.

As I noted at the beginning of this sermon, this is an emotional issue for many of us, because so many of us have been hurt... either *by* Christianity, or perhaps by those hurt by Christianity. Obviously... this sermon has fixed everything. So I know we'll *never* need to address this issue again at this church.

In all seriousness, what I do know is that Love is a powerful force. And that as diverse as all our individual views might be on this subject (and others)... as a community... if we keep Love at our center, then with a force akin to gravity, that massive love will keep us together, no matter what. It is only when our love is too weak or too small that we risk spiraling out of orbit away from one another.

And so in that spirit, I will leave you today with one of my favorite bits of Judeo-Christian wisdom. These are recognized to be the last words of the Apostle John who, well-on in years, bequeathed this command to his *own* disciples as a summation of his Christian faith inspired by Jesus: "Little Children, Love one another." Love one another.

Blessed be.