

Christianity ... A Pagan Religion?

Not long after assuming the UUA presidency in 2001, Bill Sinkford launched a years' long campaign, challenging all UU's to find a way to re-engage the language of faith. Most recently, in his column in the UUA World [Vol.22, no. 3, fall 2008], he challenged us, who have come to UU from the Christian tradition, to find a way to re-engage our Christian heritage. He wrote:

... we need to get over our Christian-phobia. Unitarian Universalists will joyfully chant the Buddhist sutras, delight in midrash of traditional Jewish texts, recite Native American prayers, and sing Gospel hymns. But ask many Unitarian Universalists to join in reading the Lord's Prayer and you are in big trouble ... This country's dominant faith is Christianity. If you are going to work in the interfaith world, you have to be able to be in the presence of people for whom the Christian message is life-saving Good News.

I completely agree and the imperative of doing that is borne out in the statistics that I've shared with you several times, most recently in my first sermon of this new church year. Please indulge me by letting me reiterate them:

In the 1997 UUA survey of beliefs among members, when asked whether anything was missing in their UU experience, over 76% said "yes" and 30% of that yearning was for an experience of greater joy and spirituality.

And when asked whether they ever considered leaving Unitarian Universalism, almost 60% said "yes" because we're too cerebral and we lack spirituality and joy.

So there's no doubt but that Sinkford has been onto something.

For me personally his January 2003 sermon titled "The Language of Faith" was the very thing that gave me the final inspiration – the courage really – to write my Easter 2003 sermon, "Shedding The Shroud," where I discussed in detail the mysterious and uninvited events that led me from atheism to spiritual humanism.

And yet, I found his most recent challenge to be a big hurdle. Exactly how am I to respectfully re-engage Christianity – such a dogmatic religion – when I reject all of its dogma? Exactly how am I to re-engage Christianity whose premise of humankind's inherent corruption needing expiation has caused so much hurtfulness and deep wounds? (Do you know, by the way, that there's a UUA curriculum called, "The Haunting Church," designed specifically to help with the needed healing?) How do you re-engage a religion that is so inherently intolerant? I'll come back to that.

But first a little digression. The week before last we celebrated Thanksgiving. At our home, we did the traditional feast – the big roast turkey, the stuffing and mashed potatoes, the cranberry sauce and the pies. The whole thing. But where in our house you'd find a roast turkey, in some households you'd find something called a roast

tofurkey. Now I don't know for sure, but I'm told that tofurkey really tastes a lot like turkey. I do know that it looks and roasts a lot like turkey – not like a whole bird, of course, but rather like a big, dressed turkey breast.

There's a teaching opportunity about Aristotelian material philosophy here that I'll spare you. But why would I even bother mentioning this tofurkey thing?

Here's the point. Things aren't always as they seem. You know that old saying, that "if it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck." Well, that's not true. Like tofurkey, some things aren't as they appear. We'll come back to the tofurkey.

So much for looking backward toward Thanksgiving. Here in the middle of Advent we look ahead to Christmas coming in just a few weeks. Celebrated by agreement among most Christians on December 25th, the day is marked as the birth of Jesus – Yeshua – a Jew born, according to the gospels, in Bethlehem and raised into adulthood in the Galilean town of Nazareth.

All of us here today, whether of Christian heritage or other, know the broad strokes of the life of this Yeshua, or Jesus – how he's born of a miraculous joining of god with a virgin girl, Mary ... how he emerges as an itinerant preacher, healer and worker of miracles, including raising the dead back to life ... how he begins to draw crowds of listeners and a band of followers called the disciples ... how many begin to see him as the promised Messiah ... how he increasingly confounds the traditional rabbis and Pharisees ... and of course how they eventually find a way to get rid of him by convincing the Roman governor that he's a rebel ... how he's crucified ... and then the big one: how after three days in the tomb, he's resurrected from the dead himself, keeps reappearing to people and eventually physically ascends into heaven. We all know the story. And I won't use this sermon to raise the question of whether there really was such a person. There's still some dispute about that, though the weight of opinion seems to be that he was a real historical figure.

As I said, we all know the story. But are we all clear that Jesus – Yeshua – is not the founder of Christianity? I phrase that as a question, because many people do think exactly that – that Jesus founded a religion, the religion known as Christianity. Those who hold that belief troop out a few lines in the Gospel of Matthew (16:13-20) – and recounted only in that gospel – namely the supposed utterance made by Jesus to Peter, saying:

“Tu es Petrus ... Thou art Peter, and upon this rock (Peter means rock, as you know) I shall build my church”

Believing Christians cite this passage as confirming that Jesus was establishing a church. Further, believers point to this passage as establishing the primacy of Peter, making him the first Pope.

Let's unpack this a bit, first by citing a few historical facts. First, Peter apparently didn't realize he was a "pope" since the first leader of the Messianic faith in Jerusalem was James - the brother of Yeshua. We'll come back to this.

In fact, until the defeat of Israel by the Romans in 135ce , there were fifteen Jewish congregational leaders of the Jerusalem Messianic community - which was the center of the Messianic faith, and Peter was not one of them! They were all relatives of Yeshua. Only after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and defeated Bar Kochva to end the war with the Jews did a non-Jewish leader arise, and he -- Bishop Marcus -- was "appointed" by the Roman Emperor Hadrian with a prime objective being to rid the faith of its "Jewishness". Hadrian was the same emperor that made circumcision a capital offense in 130CE; therefore, it doesn't take much imagination to figure out where he or his appointed church bishop stood with regard to Judiac truths. We'll come back to that, too.

Second, and just as important, there is much dispute about whether Jesus ever actually uttered the words that Matthew has him saying. What is known about that gospel is that it was written somewhere between 70 to 100 years after the death of Jesus and, most importantly, it was written in Antioch. The importance of that will become clear.

So, did Jesus – Yeshua – found a movement of any sort? It's not clear. What is clear from the historical writings of Josephus and the Acts of the Apostles is that in the wake of Jesus' death, a Messianic movement began to take shape. It's further clear that as things evolved, the movement took on the shape of a struggle – almost a civil war – between Jesus' brother James and his followers versus the convert, Paul (formerly Saul) and his.

Of the two protagonists in the story of Christianity's founding, only one can lay claim to being the brother of Jesus, namely James. Jesus' four "brothers" — James as well as Jude, Simon and Joses — are mentioned in *Matthew* 13:55, *Mark* 6:3 and by Paul in *Galatians* 1:19. Since James' name always appears first in lists, this suggests he was the eldest among them. Even in the passage in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* (20.9.1) the Jewish historian describes James as "the brother of Jesus who is called Christ,". And by dint of his being the eldest of Jesus' surviving brothers, James clearly assumed a role of primacy among the disciples following Jesus' death. Like all of the original disciples, and like Jesus himself, James was a Jew and was proud of it. Although Paul's origins are somewhat uncertain, he is generally acknowledged to have been born in Tarsus, a city in what is now Turkey, and his original name was Saul. Paul, too was a Jew and was proud of it.

The focus of their pride would put James and Paul on a collision course – a collision out of which Christianity would be born.

Saul became Paul, as the Acts of the Apostles recount it, when the resurrected Jesus appeared in a way so fearsome that Saul was thrown from his horse and blinded. Why the fearsome apparition? Well, it was a judgment on Saul for his persecution of the Messianic followers of Jesus. Paul, you see, was not just a Jew. He was also a Roman. And as a Roman, Saul – now Paul – had been rooting out cells of converts to James' Messianic form of Judaism. James, you see, was not just a brother and disciple of Jesus. He was a Judaic nationalist. For him, the supposed saying of Jesus – that he comes with fire and sword – really rang true. In ascending to primacy after Jesus' death, James was committed to assuring that the Jesus movement would be an anti-Roman rebellion.

Now you'd think that James' anti-Roman nationalism would be the thing that put him at odds with Paul. If it was, it was not particularly evident. What they were really at odds about was circumcision and what it implied. To James, the Judaic nationalist, it went without saying that converts to the Jesus movement had to be circumcised because it was, first and foremost a sect of Judaism. And an orthodox sect at that, I might add, since James made it clear that he expected those baptized into the Jesus movement to follow the Torah law.

Although a circumcised Jew himself, Paul was diametrically opposed to this. First, as a Roman citizen, he was not about to participate in a rebellion. Second, born and raised in the Hellenistic communities of Cilicia (now Turkey) he looked to the peoples of the Graeco-Roman world as his targets for evangelizing, and he knew that they would never accept the premise of first having to become a Jew in order, then, to follow the teachings of Jesus.

The accounts in the Acts of the Apostles make it clear that the struggle between these factions was quite heated. In his massive book, "James the Brother of Jesus," Robert Eisenman even quotes contemporaneous accounts of a fist-fight between James and Paul. At any rate, Paul did have to flee Jerusalem back to the more friendly climes of Syria and points north where he established many communities of converts to Jesus' philosophy. One of those communities was the early church in the Hellenic city of Antioch. The same city where the Gospel of Matthew first gets written down. And in that same city for the first time one hears the term, "Christian," being used to name the followers of Jesus. Farther up the coast is the Aegean-coastal city of Ephesus. Ephesus became the epicenter of the veneration of the Virgin Mary. Hardly a coincidence. It was, after all, the age-old center of Artemis worship, Artemis being the Hellenic goddess of the hunt, of forests and hills, and of virginity and fertility

To put a cap on it, some 14 years after he had to flee Jerusalem and James, Paul returns to participate in the First Council of Jerusalem where the elders – the bishops – reach a consensus that circumcision – and therefore becoming a Jew -- will not be a prerequisite for conversion and baptism. And with that, a new religion – a new faith organization – is born not as an extension of Judaism, but rather built upon a platform of gentile converts with Graeco-Roman, ie pagan, roots.

So is that it? Is the mere fact that Christianity sprouts mainly from the evangelizing work of Paul, a Roman citizen who opposed the fusion of Jesus' philosophy with Judaic nationalism, and fertilized Christianity in the Graeco-Roman pagan world, is that mere fact the sole basis for suggesting that Christianity is a pagan religion? Not hardly.

No. I'm suggesting that the reason that Pauline Christianity flourished in the pagan Graeco-Roman world, rather than in Judaea is that the pagan gentiles recognized it for what it was – another pagan religion with another new god.

Christianity didn't come from Jesus. It came from the accumulation of legends and theologies by people who believed in Jesus. The origin of those ideas wasn't Jesus. The origin was the myths, legends, philosophies, prejudices, literature, superstitions, and primitive cosmology of ancient western culture. **Christianity was a product of its time and place.** Take these parallels for example:

- Osiris brought his believers eternal life in Egyptian Heaven, contemplating the unutterable, indescribable glory of God.
- The sacred rites of Demeter at Eleusis brought believers happiness in their eternal life.
- Ancient writers tell us that in general ancient people believed in eternal life, with the good going to the Elysian Fields and the not so good going to Hades. .
- Vespatian's spittle healed a blind man. .
- Apollonius of Tyana raised a girl from death. .
- The Pythia , the priestesses at the Oracle at Delphi, prophesied, and over and over again for a thousand years, the prophecies came true.
- Dionysus turned water into wine, and believers were filled with the Spirit of God..
- Romulus is described as the Son of God, born of a virgin..
- Alexander the Great, and later Augustus, are each described as the Son of God, born of a mortal woman..

Christianity didn't invent its core concepts —heaven, hell, souls, eternal life, miracles, prophecies, angels, Gods, sons of God, walking talking godmen, etc.— it got all of them from the culture in which it developed. There was nothing new about the religion in its myth structure. But Jesus was a new God.

Now think about that for a minute. See, you can't have a *new* God until you first know what *God* means. And if your new God is a God, well, then He's really not new, he's just a new version of an old idea.

The first people who believed Jesus was a God already knew what properties Gods had. And when they came to tell about Jesus' holy life, they *naturally told it the way they saw it, with Jesus as a God, with the standard God properties:*

Jesus came from Heaven To Earth Via a magical God-mortal birth
In fulfillment of prophesy Heralded by magic God-sent dreams He
worked miracles He brought salvation ... He conquered death.

Check.

Jesus is a new version of an old idea. Not necessarily Jesus the man. But Jesus the Christ. Christ Jesus was a new God in the old pagan style.

Now, the true believer's impulse here is to see this "new God" business as a language trick. The true believing apologists would say that Jesus is a God of an entirely different sort than their gods were gods. Same word, different meanings. Really?

Are you familiar with the pagan god, Glycon? Early in century or so after Jesus' death — so around the same time that the Gospels were being written -- Glycon worship was spreading around the near east and into sophisticated aristocratic circles in Rome. According to the accounts, believers worshipped Glycon as the son of the God Apollo, who:

- came to Earth through a miraculous birth,

- was the Earthly manifestation of divinity,
- came to earth in fulfillment of divine prophecy,
- gave his chief believer the power of prophecy,
- gave believers the power to speak in tongues,
- performed miracles,
- healed the sick, and
- raised the dead.

But here's the thing. Glycon was the totally fictional invention of a man known to the historical record as Alexander of Abonoteichus – a con man who invented Glycon for the express – and successful – purpose of building a flock of adherents and taking their money. We know this from the essayist Lucian of Samosata who writes (in *Alexander the False Prophet*) that he went to Glycon's oracle, and spoke with Alexander, and tested his prophetic power, leaving no doubt in his mind that Alexander made up a new God specifically to fit the religious beliefs of the faithful.

And then there's the much older cult of Dionysus. Dionysus was first worshiped in Thrace (north and east of Greece). According to legend he came to Greece by the time Homer wrote the Iliad in maybe 800 BC. His priest Orpheus reworked His legend in the sixth, maybe seventh century BC and by Hellenistic times (after 332 BC) He was worshiped from Italy to Greece and into Egypt and the Middle East.

Dionysus' mother was the mortal woman, Semele; impregnated by the supreme God Zeus.

The mysteries of Dionysus celebrated the death of the God in the myth of young Dionysus-Zagreus. According to legend he was torn apart by the Titans, boiled, and eaten. Only his heart was left; it was buried and from it Dionysus was resurrected and ascended to heaven. Isn't it amazing how ridiculous other peoples' myths are!

Belief in Dionysus brought salvation. In Italy, in the fourth century BC, texts written on gold plates and buried with the dead, describe the souls of Dionysus followers in the afterlife, drinking not from one particular spring in Hades, but from another pool of cool water that will give them divinity and eternal life.

Dionysus was celebrated in Civic religion and in mysteries. The annual Mysteries of Dionysus included initiation of new adherents by bathing — baptism, and a sacred meal — a eucharist.

One could go on and on ... the worship of Osiris in Egypt ... and the Roman god, Attis, whose feast was celebrated on what became December 25th, and who was known to worshippers as "the Good Sheppard," the "Most High God," the "Only Begotten Son" and "Savior." Attis is particularly interesting for his cult's myths around death and resurrection. According to Frazer (citation) On March 22 a pine tree was brought to the sanctuary of Cybele, on it was hung the effigy of Attis. The God was dead. Two days of mourning followed. On the eve of the third day, March 25th, the worshippers turned to joy

“For suddenly a light shone in the darkness; the tomb was opened; the God had risen from the dead...[and the priest] softly whispered in their ears the glad tidings of salvation. The resurrection of the God was hailed by his disciples as a promise that they too would issue triumphant from the corruption of the grave.” [for more see Frazer, Attis, chapter 1]

But to go on and on would be just piling on. The point is that Christianity – the organized religion, the church – is just full of paganism or at least pagan elements. The origin of its legends and theologies wasn't Jesus. The origin was the myths, legends, philosophies, prejudices, literature, superstitions, and primitive cosmology of ancient western culture. They got into Christianity the same way they got into Osirisism, Mithrasism, and Dionysianism — from the culture.

When Paul and Mark, Matthew, Luke and John sat down to write about Jesus, did they have the Revised Standard Version of The Gospel of the Pagan Gods open on the table? No; of course not. What they had was already in their heads, namely the same ideas about the properties of a God that everyone had back then. Miracles. Magic births. Prophecies. Et cetera. So, Paul and Mark, Matthew, Luke, John and all the other first Christians understood exactly what a God was, and they thought Jesus was one -- not necessarily *the god*, but at least *a god*. So their stories about Him naturally included His God properties. It happened in that order. First they thought Jesus was a God or the God, then they told his story using the accepted, stylized god imagery. Did people at that time actually believe that Jesus' god-stories were factual biography? Not sure but not necessarily. What is certain was the accepted premise that “IF one were a god, THEN these were the stories and feats expected of a god.” And an evangelist certainly could not successfully convince that someone was a god without wrapping these stories around that someone, that god, or that would-be god – remember Attis. And so what do the gospels tell us about the historical Jesus? Not sure; maybe not much. Maybe we should invite my neighbor, Hal Taussig, minister of Chestnut Hill Methodist Church and a charter member of the Jesus Seminar, to speak to that question. But the gospels certainly tell us a lot about what the evangelists and many of the early Christians believed.

Why do I find all this not only terrifically interesting, but personally important? It's because I find in this understanding my way of fulfilling Sinkford's challenge to re-engage Christianity. As some of you know, I was a regular attender here for at least two years before I signed the book and began to actually call myself a UU. And I know that some of you here would say, “Two years? That's nothing” Well, this is my story and maybe some of you ex-Catholics at least can identify with it.

An atheist, I was checking out UU churches as a way to find someplace to bring our children for ethical Sunday-schooling. On the one hand I was somewhat optimistically inclined to UU because when I was in the seminary, UU was presented as a non-Christian church. But on the other hand, what I found was a place Protestant in every visible way: its cruciform chapel, the crosses everywhere, the 4 Evangelists up there in the window behind me, and the typically Protestant hymn-sandwich worship format.

But like the tofurkey, looks can deceive. What I was hearing in conversations and coming from the pulpit was anything but traditionally Protestant or even Christian, per se,

for that matter. Further, it came as a very pleasant surprise to learn that UU did not even have a seat at that very Protestant Christian table known as the National Council of Churches. Believe it or not, learning that fact was the thing – irrational as it may be -- that tipped me in the direction of signing the book.

Well then, can you imagine my sense of liberation coming from realizing that Christianity itself is one big knock-off? It's a complete demythologizing. A complete dis-empowering of Christianity's hold on any last vestiges of abandonment guilt. And freed from Christianity's power-lock hold on conscience, I feel free to re-engage with Christianity from a position of powerful freedom of conscience.

Free to acknowledge with neither guilt nor nostalgia, but rather with an appreciative understanding of the human joy that believer's take from the fact that in Jesus they find God entering the world, the life, of man – just the way followers of Dionysus did.

Free to acknowledge with neither guilt nor nostalgia. But rather with an appreciative understanding of the human need to experience compassion and acceptance that believers find in Jesus' passion and death, and ultimate optimism in his triumph over death – just as the followers of Attis did.

It gives a whole new meaning to the phrase “gimee that old time religion.” And it gives me a way to meet Sinkford's challenge to re-engage my Christian heritage.

Seeing Christianity as just another really old time religion can free one from feeling a need to engage Christianity from a position of self-justification. Free to acknowledge that Christianity didn't wound me any more than did Zoroastrianism, Mithraism or Mohammedanism. Christianity, no. Dogmatic Christians, yes. Dogmatic Christians who too often preach and practice the Old Testament of division and separation, dogmatic rules designed to separate a purified children of god from their unclean, unsaved, neighbors – like me. An Old Testament of exclusion rules rather than Jesus Christ's New Testament of inclusive love. In this we can identify with no less than Gandhi who noted, “I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians; your Christians are so unlike Christ.”

Seeing Christianity dispassionately, historically, not only can we liberate ourselves from the false tests and limits imposed by these Old Testament Christians, but we liberate Christ from them as well. And only when we free ourselves from vestiges of our anger and/or our shame, are we freed to embrace Christ's New Testament of love and patience and kindness. And only then, from that place of compassion, are we free to engage these Old Testament Christians just as people. As people – frail humans like ourselves - -- with the same human needs for belonging, acceptance, forgiveness for shortcomings, and reason to keep hope alive.

It makes me free to proclaim with neither guilt nor nostalgia but with simple human joy that I wish you all a very Merry Christmas!

And Blessed Be!

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