

The Entire History of Unitarian Universalism (Abridged)

March 28, 2010

EPIGRAM

To kill a man is not to defend a doctrine, but to kill a man.

-- Michael Servetus, burned at the stake in 1553 for his Unitarian beliefs.

CHALICE LIGHTING

As Unitarian Universalists we affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.



OPENING WORDS - Julie Ham

Today our Christian friends and loved ones are celebrating Palm Sunday, the beginning of the holiest week in the Christian calendar, which ends next Sunday, with the celebration of Easter.

Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Vernal Equinox or first day of Spring. This rather cumbersome formula was one of the ideas that became official Christian Church doctrine, during the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

It could also be said that Unitarianism Universalism was born at this ecumenical council which also adopted the Trinity as part of the official Church creed; exiling Unitarians, as heretics, from “official” Christianity.

The emperor Constantine called 15 hundred Christian bishops to his summer home in Nicaea, hoping to quell the divisive, and sometimes violent, disputes concerning the various beliefs about Jesus and his teachings; and also hoping that a unified church would favorably serve his empire, Some 280 to 318 bishops accepted the emperor's invitation. But things did not go quite as Constantine planned.

One of the most contentious issues between Christians, and at the Council ,was the debate about whether Jesus was the figurative or literal “son of God.” With only two dissenting votes, the bishops at the Council determined that Jesus was “of the same substance” as the Father. Thus Jesus became God; a position which also gave the Christian Church greater spiritual authority than the emperor.

But the controversy continued. The Council's “official” decision did not end the debates about the divinity of Jesus, which continue even today. Arguments, and even riots, among opposing factions continued to plague Constantine's empire.

And on his deathbed, when Constantine finally agreed to be baptized, he was baptized as a follower of Arius, a Christian monotheist who saw Jesus as a divine “creature” of God, not an equal with God. So although, Constantine, is often credited with unifying and empowering the Christian Church, he could be said to have been one of its first heretics.

Today Marc and I are talking about heretics and other UU truth-seekers. Let us consider their journeys, as well as our own, as we worship together this morning.

SOURCES

Saving Paradise by Rita Nakashima Broc and Rebecca Ann Parker, pp 107-110

First Council of Nicaea, Wikipedia, <http://search.creativecommons.org/?q=nicaea&sourceid>

Council of Nicaea, *Classic Encyclopedia: Based on the 11th Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica (published 1911)*; http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Council_of_Nicaea

HYMN #105 From Age to Age

READING 1 - Julie Ham #566 "God is One" by Francis David

In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation.

You need not think alike to love alike.

There must be knowledge in faith also.

Sanctified reason is the lantern of faith.

Religious reform can never be all at once, but gradually, step by step.

If they offer something better, I will gladly learn.

The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all spiritual joy and happiness.

Conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice.

We must accept God's truth in this lifetime. Salvation must be accomplished here on Earth.

God is indivisible.

Egy As Isten \Egde Oz Eeshten\

God is one.

READING 2 - Marc Renault

This reading is taken from William Ellery Channing's Sermon "Unitarian Christianity" delivered in 1819. The language is a bit antiquated, but it is nice to hear the original words.

...We believe in the doctrine of God's UNITY, or that there is one God, and one only. ...We object to the doctrine of the Trinity...According to this doctrine, there are three infinite and equal persons, possessing supreme divinity, called the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Each of these persons, as described by theologians, has his own particular consciousness, will, and perceptions. They love each other, converse with each other, and delight in each other's society.

If we examine the passages in which Jesus is distinguished from God, we shall see, that they not only speak of him as another being, but seem to labor to express his inferiority. ...the human condition and sufferings of Christ [tend] strongly to exclude from men's minds the idea of his proper Godhead.

We do, then, with all earnestness... protest against the irrational and unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity. *With* Jesus, we worship the Father, as the only living and true God. We are astonished, that any man can read the New Testament, and avoid the conviction that the Father alone is God.

HYMN #295 Sing Out Praises for the Journey

THE SERMON - Marc Renault

Introduction

I'm fairly new to Unitarian Universalism. In fact, I'm a little surprised that they let me stand behind this pulpit and talk to you. What do I know? Well, not much, so I thought I'd use this opportunity to study Unitarian Universalism more in depth and find out more about this community that I've joined - you know, and see if I really wanted to stay :-). (Don't worry; I do.)

In preparation for today I dug deep into the history of Unitarian Universalism. I gathered events, places, people, names, dates, burnings at stakes, imprisonments, great speeches, and political intrigue.... I had a lot of facts, but kept wondering "What drives Unitarian Universalism?" What is the common theme that holds together these 2000 years of history, and brought us to March 28, 2010? I think it's something like this:

The history of Unitarian Universalism is a history of people seeking capital-T **Truth**; it is a history of people not satisfied to limit their search for that Truth within the boundaries of tradition and holy scriptures; it is a history of people seeking to reconcile the dogma of Christianity with the careful application of reason and their real-life experience. And more than just seekers of Truth, these are people daring to speak their conscience and conviction in the face of social castigation and even death.

Early Christianities

Truly, Unitarianism and Universalism are, at their core, statements of Christian theology. Unitarianism is more or less a statement of disbelief in the trinity. Universalism is the belief that everybody will someday be reconciled and reunited with God. These views (along with many competing views) have existed since the very beginning of Christianity.

The first few centuries A.D. bustled with a hodge-podge of competing Christianities. Something amazing had happened regarding this man named Jesus. Several people wrote his life story -- the four gospels; the apostle Paul spread news of Jesus throughout modern-day Israel, Syria, Turkey, Macedonia, and Greece; churches and Christian communities started springing up everywhere, and letters among those communities were exchanged. Slowly, between the years 45 and 100, a collection of holy scriptures emerged. What was missing was a single cohesive theology. Christians all agreed that Jesus was the son of God, and his death on a cross means salvation for believers.

But right there the disagreements begins: "Jesus was the son of God and his death means salvation for believers." What exactly was the relationship between Jesus and God? On one hand, Jesus and God seem SEPARATE. At one point, Jesus is talking with his disciples about when a certain prediction will come to pass and he says "But of that day or hour, no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." On the other hand, there are

scriptures that indicate that Jesus and God ARE ONE. The gospel of John opens with the sentence, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God" (John 1:1); at one point Jesus says "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

- Trinitarians held that God exists eternally in three separate persons of the same substance and equal authority - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Non-Trinitarians didn't believe that; some felt that Jesus *was* God, and others felt that there was one God of ultimate authority, and that Jesus, although holy and maybe even divine, did not have that ultimate authority.

Well what about the notion that Jesus' death brings salvation to believers? The idea is that we all are sinful by nature, but Jesus takes the punishment that we deserve, and so we can be reconciled with God. But does Jesus' atoning sacrifice cover *everyone's* sin? or only those who believe in him? The scriptures say, "[Jesus Christ] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2) But is that atoning sacrifice merely *available* for those who choose to believe, or is everyone really saved, whether they believe or not?

In the year 325, the Roman emperor Constantine gathered a council in Nicaea, a city in present-day Turkey, to bring uniformity to Christian beliefs. There the council produced the Nicene creed. The creed is silent on Universalism, but contains strong language supporting the trinity. It declared in no uncertain terms that God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are distinct, and yet Jesus is "of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." Anyone who disagreed was a heretic and a danger to the salvation of souls.

The Renaissance

Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic strand of Christianity came to dominate Europe. Deep traditions were established and the power of the state and the power of the church became intertwined. But with the 1400's and 1500's came the Renaissance - a rebirth of intellectual curiosity. Copernicus formulated a heliocentric view of the solar system, Columbus discovered a new continent, Leonardo Di Vinci astounded the world with his artistic genius, and Gutenberg invented the printing press. People's eyes were opened and they saw the world and the universe in a way they never had before.

Galileo turned his telescope to the skies and observed moons orbiting Jupiter. Here was empirical evidence that not every celestial object revolves around the Earth. Galileo promoted the sun-centered view of the solar system. The church was not at all happy. They banned his work because it contradicted scripture.

The Pope and his advisors could easily find passages in the Bible where holy men like Solomon spoke of the sun rising and setting. This only made sense if the sun was circling the Earth. Could Solomon be wrong? Of course not — Galileo was. The message was clear — scientists could investigate the universe, but don't expect religion to endorse your work if it contradicts scripture. (<http://www.theturning.org/folder/universe.html>)

The Renaissance also brought about Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation. There was a widespread sense of corruption within the Catholic church, and for the first time in centuries, a serious attempt was made to reform church doctrine and bring the scriptures back to central importance. Martin Luther's challenge emboldened other reformers like Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin. "[T]he reformers soon disagreed among themselves and divided their movement according to doctrinal differences... consequently resulting in the establishment of different and rival Protestant [denominations]." (Wikipedia - Protestant Reformation)

In any revolution, there will be those who say the revolutionaries didn't go far enough, and the Unitarians and Universalists raised that cry. For example, Michael Servetus was a Spanish physician, theologian, and scientist who lived in the early 1500's right at the start of the Protestant Reformation. He was a brilliant man; as a young boy he had read the entire Bible in its original Greek and Hebrew. Servetus was the first great thinker to give Unitarianism an intellectual foundation. He wrote many books expressing his dissent from the Trinitarian view that Jesus and God were distinct beings. His book *On Errors of the Trinity* raised the great ire of both Catholics and Protestants by claiming that God and Jesus are the same. By today's standards, his views seem benign. He writes, for example,

I do not separate Christ from God any more than a voice from the speaker or a ray from the sun. Christ is in the Father as a voice from the speaker. He and the Father are as the ray and the sun are one light.

Unitarian scholar Earl Morse Wilbur states, "Servetus' *On Errors of the Trinity* is hardly heretical in intent, rather it is suffused with passionate earnestness, warm piety, [and] an ardent reverence for Scripture... Servetus asserted that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were dispositions of God, and not separate and distinct beings."

These aren't the kinds of assertions we would kill people for today.

Michael Servetus in Spain and John Calvin in Geneva Switzerland maintained a correspondence, although not a particularly warm one. Calvin perceived Servetus' publications as a direct attack against Calvin's attempt to set down true Christian doctrine. At one point Calvin sent Servetus a copy of one of his books, perhaps in the hope of keeping Servetus busy for a while and off his back, and Servetus immediately returned it, thoroughly annotated, with critical observations. Although Servetus was brilliant, he did not endear himself to others. Calvin wrote to a friend,

"Servetus has just sent me a long volume of his ravings. If I consent he will come here, but I will not give my word for if he comes here, if my authority is worth anything, I will never permit him to depart alive."

In 1553 Servetus arrived in Geneva unannounced and attended a sermon by Calvin. Calvin immediately had him arrested. A couple months later Servetus was burned at the stake for, (quote), "denying the Trinity and infant baptism."

These were tough times for anyone who went against dominant theological views. Calvin hated the Anabaptists, who were the forbears of our modern day Amish. Their crime? They believed that people should be baptized not as infants, but only after a profession of faith. And for this he wanted them burned at the stake.

Fortunately, there were pockets of tolerance to be found in Europe. Transylvania (now part of Romania) was on the border between Europe in Christian turmoil to the north and west, and the Islamic Ottoman empire to the south. Through a series of events the young widowed Queen Isabella Jagiello found herself to be the ruler of Transylvania. Her personal physician was an early Unitarian, and in 1557, convinced by his teachings, she declared the Decree of Religious Tolerance. The decree called for "each person to maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all."

Queen Isabella died shortly after the Decree and her teen-age son, John Sigismund, assumed the throne. King John continued the spirit of religious toleration, and in fact strengthened it. He even sponsored a great 10-day public debate with Lutherans, Calvinists, Catholics and Unitarians. In the end, he was convinced by the arguments of Unitarian Francis David. King John announced his personal embrace of Unitarianism and appointed Francis David as his court preacher (Recall that earlier in the service Julie led us in a reading by Francis David.) He is often remembered today for his words, "We need not think alike to love alike" [Interfaith Heroes]

Sadly, King John did not live long, and religious tolerance did not remain in Transylvania. However, to this day Transylvania retains a strong Unitarian heritage.

The 1600's and 1700's saw an explosion of philosophical and scientific understanding. This was the "Age of Enlightenment" and people saw new ways of finding capital-T Truth. Truth was found not only in scriptures, but also through the process of reasoning and through experimentation and observation. Rene Descartes averred "I think therefore I am," and David Hume declared any book without numbers and experimentation fit only for the flames.

America

The 1600's and 1700's also saw the establishment and growth of colonies in America. Perhaps it was the "individual spirit" of America, but liberal religious ideas (not specifically Unitarian) grew among the colonists. There was a general trend toward rationalism and liberal theology.

Well, the pendulum swung the other way in 1740 with the conservative Calvinist religious movement known as the Great Awakening. Jonathan Edwards was a key figure in the movement with his famous "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" sermon.

Your wickedness makes you ... heavy as lead...and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

As a reaction to *this*, the New England liberal religious community found a reason to unite. In the face of this new wave of Calvinism they promoted "(1) a commitment to logic and reason in theology, (2) a Biblicism that was strict but that demanded critical and historical analysis, and (3) an overriding concern for moral aspiration as the focal point of the Christian religion."
[Robinson, p. 10]

At the start of the 1800's liberal Bible scholar Henry Ware was appointed Chair of Theology at Harvard Divinity school. Conservatives were aghast and Unitarian/Trinitarian debates raged for 20 years. It was around this time that the English word "Unitarian" came into use. It was originally a pejorative term used by conservatives, but the religious liberals soon took it and rallied behind it.

In 1819 William Ellery Channing delivered a benchmark sermon called "Unitarian Christianity." So powerful was it, that the delivery of this sermon is sometimes called the official beginning of Unitarianism in America. In this sermon Channing proudly claimed the title of Unitarian and clearly defined its theology. Channing emphasized the humanity of Jesus, the goodness of humankind, and the use of reason in religion. His sermon was published as a pamphlet and it became immensely popular; in fact, its popularity was second only to Thomas Paine's "Common Sense." (Incidentally, his sermon was *five times* as long as this one!)

In any revolution, there will be those who say the revolutionaries didn't go far enough, and just as American Unitarianism was finding its feet, the Transcendentalists complained that it wasn't liberal enough.

The Transcendentalist movement centered around Ralph Waldo Emerson who declared that spiritual truth could be found by looking within. It promoted "radical individualism." There was

no need for holy scriptures or church dogma to bring us truth from the outside. All truth was within you if you looked deep enough. Emerson wrote

"... [W]ithin man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal ONE.... We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are shining parts, is the soul."

Throughout the second half of the 1800's, Unitarianism spread west to California, and those Westerners were more liberal than their Eastern counterparts -- you know how it is out in California :-). Eventually, the whole of Unitarianism experienced "liberal drift" away from Biblical literalism and the divinity of Jesus. At the end of the 1800's, in 1894, Unitarians came together at a national conference where they all adopted a non-creedal stance.

I have said nothing about *Universalists* in America. Frankly, they just weren't as controversial ☺. They developed in parallel to the Unitarians, but were never particularly liberal. The Universalist position, that all would be saved, was radical with respect to that one theological idea, but in other respects, they were conservative. They maintained the centrality of Jesus and the authority of the Bible.

However, as the 20th century dawned, the Universalists started seeing their "universalism" in a different way. "The Universalists were beginning to look beyond the strictly theological connotations of the name 'Universalist.' They were beginning to see that the term *Universalist* could denote the universal community of all men and women and the necessity of working toward the secular realization of that community through peace and justice on earth."
[Robinson, p. 6]

Eventually, both Unitarians and Universalists recognized their similarities: they both had Christian origins, they desired a search for truth and meaning that placed an emphasis on reason, and they both desired social justice. In 1961 they joined to form the Unitarian Universalist Association. The singular identity of the UU's was further established when the seven principles were adopted in 1984.

Conclusion

To my mind, much of the history of Unitarian Universalism has been about the struggle to reconcile scripture and faith on the one hand, and reason and experience on the other. At first, those heretics who disagreed with Trinity theology reasoned within the boundaries of scripture, but as the centuries passed, our forebears moved away from "the Bible as the word of God" and focused on the value of life in the here and now.

So *here* and *now*, where do we seek out spiritual truth? Do we go to holy scripture? Gurus? Reason alone? Do we meditate and look within? Rely on scientific experimentation? Is truth and meaning "out there" only to be delivered to us by the supernatural, or is it attainable through our own efforts? Is truth objective or is "my truth" as good as "your truth"?

I will now answer all of those questions 😊

I'd like to assert that there *is* truth we can all agree on. [*Take a black and white rock, mix them up, hide one away in pocket, put the other in closed fist.*] What is the color of the rock in my fist? There *IS* a color. Truth is not individual. We cannot say "my truth" is as good as "your truth" - we must admit not knowing. Reason fails us. We might be able to find a scripture somewhere that gives an answer, and that would be the best we could do. [*Reveal the hidden rock, show to everyone.*] *NOW*, with a little more information, reason provides a path to truth. Now we deduce the color of the rock in my fist. Here's a miracle: we each apply reasoning individually, but we can arrive at a common answer.

But our living experience tells us there's more than reason that rules our lives - there are the passions of our heart. A couple weeks ago I sat watching my 6-year-old daughter Olivia practice the piano. I was suddenly struck in the moment -- watching her concentrate, seeing her lips move as she counted the beats, watching her small fingers find the right keys -- I was struck that this was my daughter, and I was so proud to see this child grow up. My eyes teared up, and I had to give her an extra big hug right there and tell her I loved her.

Later that same night we were reading a fictional story about a young orphaned boy who had not been shown love and then was given a hug for the first time in many many years. Although the story was fiction, it broke my heart in the knowledge that there are children who do not receive the love that they should.

Perhaps this is the bigger, deeper truth: We don't need a holy scripture to tell us that our hearts soar when a loved one does well, or that it aches when tragedy strikes those near us. No supernatural edict is necessary to tell us we should hug our children every night.

Today - this day, March 28, 2010 - let us be Unitarian Universalists in the spirit of 2000 years of Unitarian Universalists. Let us be heretics and rebels, with minds that think, with hearts that love, and with hands that are ready to serve. Amen.

HYMN #145 As Tranquil Streams

CLOSING WORDS

He drew a circle that shut me out --
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in.
- Edward Markham

Sources

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