

Theological Options for Unitarian Universalists
Part I: Liberal Christianity
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In 1976, the year I turned 30, I decided it was high time I went to church again! Don't ask me what prompted this decision after many years away. Maybe it was the Spirit – or maybe it had to do with that landmark birthday close at hand. All I knew was that something was missing from my life. There was a void, and my intuition told me a church might fill it.

But which church? From the late sixties, I remembered grand old Arlington Street Church, one of the historic Unitarian Universalist churches in the middle of Boston. I'd first encountered it when I was new to Boston, fresh out of college, and involved in the anti-war movement. Arlington Street Church had been making headlines in the late sixties. It was the site of a massive draft card turn-in, and later gave sanctuary to a young draft resister. All this had attracted me, and I'd become a member.

But, as with all my flirtations with religion in my twenties, this one didn't last very long. I'd signed the book, and then drifted away after a year. When I walked through the massive double doors again, one bright morning in October of '76, I'd been gone for eight years.

The Rev. Victor Carpenter had just become ASC's new minister. He'd served in Philadelphia before coming to Boston, and in Cape Town, South Africa, before that. My first Sunday back to church, he preached from the high pulpit – a powerful and moving sermon, much of it based on personal experience, about South Africa. I was deeply moved.

But suddenly, toward the end of the sermon, Victor shifted gears. He mentioned the "How my mind has changed" series which appears sometimes in the journal *Christian Century*. He then said, "I want you to know that my mind has changed, too."

Victor went on, and here I'm paraphrasing rather than quoting: "For years," he said, "I subscribed to a kind of bland religious liberalism. But I've come to the conclusion that this doesn't speak to the condition of suffering people. Because of the suffering I saw in South Africa, I've decided that...I'm a Christian! A liberal Christian, to be sure – but still, a Christian."

As I listened in the pew, my heart sank. "Oh, dear!" I thought. "What has become of the Arlington Street Church?" I looked nervously around – was I in the right place? Was THIS the humanist ASC I had once known? Had the service not been nearing an end, I might have bolted for the nearest exit.

For, after all, I was definitely *not* a Christian! I had decided *that*, after all, during my junior year of high school! Since then, I hadn't given Christianity much thought at all – but I still knew I wasn't “one of those.”

And so, on a Sunday morning in 1976, I was in a quandary. It had taken some gumption to get myself up that morning and head downtown, by myself, to church. But now I was wondering, “Do I really belong here?” On the other hand, I didn't know where else I might go - so I stayed.

Since then, my religious odyssey has taken me many places I couldn't have imagined. Who would have dreamed, for example, that as militantly unchurched a soul as I, would end up at divinity school, preparing for the ministry? And who would have imagined, amidst the spiritual freedom that a UU congregation offers, that I would slowly be led back to God?

But that's another story. For now, let me point out one more irony buried in the narrative – one that has nothing to do with me. I'm talking about the irony of an Arlington Street Church minister announcing his Christian faith – and the irony of a person in its pews ever questioning it.

Arlington Street Church, you see, was the direct descendant of Federal Street Church, the church of William Ellery Channing. Channing, one of the founders of our denomination, was the most articulate 19th century proponent of “Unitarian Christianity.” The wooden pulpit from which he preached still had a place of honor in Arlington Street's Sanctuary.

Had Channing attended services at ASC that morning, he might have been as surprised as I was – but for a different reason. “So!” he might have been thinking. “My successor in this pulpit has decided he's a Christian?! But of course! That's what Unitarianism is all about. It's been Christian since the mid-1500s!”

Channing would have been right. Unitarian Universalism has been around for some 450 years. And Unitarianism started as a liberal Christian movement – some would say a Christian heresy – in Europe. It was part of the “left wing of the Reformation.” And it continued as a Christian movement, on both sides of the Atlantic, for over three centuries. Universalism is younger – some two centuries old – but it, too, began as a Christian movement, proclaiming the “everlasting love of God.”

To be sure, Unitarian Universalism has evolved since Channing's time. Less than a generation after Channing preached “Unitarian Christianity,” Ralph Waldo Emerson stood up in the chapel at Harvard Divinity School, and issued his own manifesto, announcing his breakaway from Christian faith. And a few generations after that, Humanists declared that you could have a perfectly good religion without any concept of *God*, let alone Jesus – and in effect pronounced Emerson's brand of mysticism a thing of the past.

Over the years, UU Christians and theists have felt put upon by the Humanist movement. But now, in our post-modern age, many Humanists find themselves beleaguered, as theistic religion has made a comeback. Within Unitarian Universalism, things have a way of coming full circle. Our religion is constantly evolving; it never stands still for very long. That's not surprising, when you consider that we have no creed, no set doctrine. Without a creed constraining us, we engage in a kaleidoscopic process, giving birth to new perspectives, in a way akin to Hegel's dialectical model of "thesis/antithesis/synthesis."

What's especially interesting about this is what happens to the "older" versions of UUism, when new ones come along. The older perspectives don't go away – they're never completely eclipsed. Individual UUs continue to identify with them – and sometimes whole congregations do, too. Thus, in the 1950s and 60s, Humanism was probably the dominant mode within UU congregations. But Christian UUs, and Christian UU churches, continued, though they felt beleaguered at times.

UUism is not a theological melting pot; we're more like a mosaic. In practical terms, what that means is that UUs have a variety of theological options to choose from, and to synthesize for themselves. Some of these options are fairly new, but some are deeply rooted in our tradition.

In the next three weeks, my plan is to explore the three options most deeply rooted in UU history. Today, we look at Christianity. Next week, we'll look at mystical universalism, or Transcendentalism. The week after that, we'll examine Religious Humanism. All of these represent significant periods of our history. And all of them represent living options for UUs today.

Christianity has the deepest roots in our movement. Both Unitarianism and Universalism started as Christian movements. Many people today believe that there's no longer a place for Christians within Unitarian Universalism. But nothing could be further from the truth.

Liberal Christianity is alive and well within many of our congregations. In fact, some members of this congregation identify as Christian. And even if most UUs will never call themselves "Christian," they may be surprised to discover how much richness there is within Christian tradition – in the stories, symbols, and liturgical calendar. This is a wealth that even non-Christians can draw upon in their spiritual explorations.

How do Christians come into our congregations? Some, of course, are born into them. They have a happy childhood in a Christian UU church, and never find any reason to leave! Others leave a more orthodox church, attracted by the spiritual freedom within Unitarian Universalism.

Some come in because of a theological "mixed marriage." The UU congregation becomes the place of common ground, between their Christian faith and the different faith of their partner. And then there are those who come in as *non*-Christians, and within

the freedom of the UU congregation are surprised to discover a vibrant Christian faith for themselves.

Unfortunately, Christians in UU congregations often encounter obstacles. Chief among these, I'm afraid, is the intolerance of other UUs. When UU Christians come to our congregations, they often have to listen to anti-Christian diatribes from people whose knowledge of Christianity stopped in high school. They have to smile politely when UUs tell them, "I'm not a Christian because I don't believe in X," knowing full well that they don't believe in X, either – whether X is the literal truth of the virgin birth, or the anti-gay stance of fundamentalist churches.

In fact, UU Christians often have to deal with a certain kind of "UU fundamentalism" – UUs who strangely insist that the *only* valid form of Christianity is the conservative variety. These people sometimes tell UU Christians, "There's no such thing as liberal Christianity. You *can't* be both UU and Christian."

Sometimes, UU Christians must even endure other UUs telling them that they don't belong in their own congregations – people who ask, "Why don't you go across the street to the United Methodists?"

And some Christians finally *do* leave our congregations – they give up on us and decide the struggle isn't worth it. But others stay – correctly insisting that they have as much right to be here as the liberal Jew sitting next to them at worship, or the pagan, the Buddhist, or the Humanist. And not only do they have just as much claim to belong here – they have an equal right to speak their faith, and be heard with respect.

What kinds of Christians do we find in UU congregations? They are as diverse as any other group of UUs. There are classic Unitarian or Universalist Christians – those who follow the humane religion of Channing or Ballou.

There are Christian Humanists, who appreciate the bedrock assumptions of the biblical view of life, starting with the affirmation of creation found in Genesis: "God saw that it was good." They also value the ways in which Christian art, music, and philosophy have shaped Western culture through the centuries.

There are Liberation Christians, who see Jesus as part of a long line of Hebrew prophets – people who spoke out against injustice, putting their lives on the line. Jesus' animating vision was the thoroughly Jewish concept of "the Commonwealth of God" – the reign of love and justice, the inherent worth and dignity of all. Liberation Christians work to make this vision a reality.

Another group of UU Christians might be called "Zen Christians." Rather than focus on Jesus as a prophet, they see him in the context of other religious teachers, and revere him as a sage. They might study his parables as "Christian *koans*," rather than as moralistic fables. They may also adopt some kind of contemplative practice, which bears a striking

resemblance to other meditative practices. In fact, Christian contemplation has a long history in the West. It was in eclipse for centuries, but is now making a comeback.

Finally, some UUs are “narrative Christians” – the ones to which Carl Scovel refers in the reading I shared this morning. Often, these are Christians with a mythological, or Jungian, bent. They take the bible “seriously but not literally,” recognizing the power of its stories and myths. These are valued, not in a literal way, but because they have something important to say about human life – perhaps even about *our* lives. The stories speak to us of finding hope in the midst of despair, and life in the midst of destruction and death.

By listing these specifics, I don’t mean to exhaust the possibilities. The variations may well be endless. Let me leave you with just one suggestion: Next time a UU tells you they’re a Christian, resist the temptation to say, “But how can you possibly be a Christian if you’re a UU?” You might say instead, “Oh, that’s interesting – tell me more! How did you become a Christian? And what keeps you here, within our congregation?”

They will no doubt be pleasantly surprised by this line of questioning – just as you may be surprised by their answer. And the exchange will contribute to the Creative Interchange: the ongoing conversation that makes being a UU worthwhile.