

**Sermon April 6, 2008 “Our Biblical Heritage: Engaging Our Fourth Source”  
Rev. Martha Hodges**

The Reverend Victoria Weinstein, in the collection cited above, writes of her experience as a “closeted Christian” in our Unitarian Universalist tradition:

“But where was Jesus in our UU worship life? I had never once questioned his absence in my childhood church, but I now began to wonder. Since Jesus’ radical inclusivity, love of humanity, and passion for justice was so harmonious with all the ‘good news’ I was hearing in our congregations, why did our ministers and congregants so assiduously avoid the Gospels? I found it comical on some Sundays, depressing on other Sundays, and consistently baffling. I could not understand why UUs would allow the perversions of the Religious Right to define the word *Christian* (or *religious*, for that matter), why they would concede religious language to the conservatives, and why they would go out of their way to construct a religion intentionally bereft of theology, rendering themselves a quasi-religion and many of their churches temples of denial and hypocrisy, where every spiritual path but the Christian path was considered valid and where all evidence of a Christian past was removed, revised, and painted over.

It took ten more years of committed Unitarian Universalist life for me to consider that perhaps my dear UUs were the most strangely faithful Christians of all. Having either intuitively or consciously embraced Jesus’ gospel of love, service, and justice, they could not stand to affiliate with any so-called faithful who claimed to have received *their* inspiration for discrimination, exclusion, superstition, and damnation from the same source. The well, for too many UUs, had been irrevocably poisoned, and they would thereafter drink of the living waters from another source. Any other source, it seemed, but the Christian well...”

I believe there have actually been many good reasons for Unitarian Universalists to disassociate themselves from their Christian past, both as a denomination and as individuals. After all, many of us, having been deeply wounded by orthodox upbringings – sometimes Jewish orthodoxy, but more commonly, Christian orthodoxy – many of us come to Unitarian Universalism in search of an alternative way to live spiritual lives, to reclaim a relationship with God that would heal some of those wounds in community with other religious seekers.

We come to Unitarian Universalism seeking a faith that will not diminish or reject us for our gender or sexual orientation; that welcomes questioning and doubt and the free use of our reason; that encourages us to trust in the authority of our own experience; that affirms our essential goodness, rather than a conception of humans as innately depraved and in need of redemption. We come here in reaction against a theology that glorifies patriarchy, obedience, suffering and sacrifice, a story of violence and victimization. Why **would** our churches intentionally remind us of those hurtful experiences of our pasts? Why would they deny us the comfort of a blessed sense of homecoming, of welcome, of

a true alternative to a tradition in which we have known intolerance, rigidity and oppression?

Now I myself did not grow up in that kind of religion, but growing up Unitarian, I did experience my share of teachers, friends and relatives telling me I would go to hell, my share of the orthodox telling me I was unworthy, that my religion was trivial, if it was really a religion at all. In fact, I freely admit that I was probably as anti-Christian as anyone reacting against having been raised in the most conservative Christian church. I was puzzled – even appalled -- by the stories of a vengeful and temperamental God, stories of a virgin birth, of rising from the dead.

When I got wind of the fact that there was such a thing as a UU Christian, I admit that my secret thought was, “You have dozens of churches to choose from. I have only one. Why are you trying to change this church to be more like the others?”

Well, I’ve learned better. UU Christians do not, in fact, have dozens of churches to choose from. They are UUs, and, like me, belong here. I’ve learned that there are as many kinds of Christians as there are UUs, and that my prejudice, like any other, was based on ignorance. I learned that one need not believe in the Trinity – to believe that Jesus was God -- to be a Christian. I learned that some Unitarian Universalists embrace the teachings of Jesus and find inspiration in his story and even try to model their lives on his – that, in this way, they resemble the very earliest followers of Jesus. That they practice the religion **of** Jesus, as they understand it, not the religion **about** him that has been built up over the centuries by a church that is as flawed and as prone to venality and abuses of power as any other human institution.

We might wonder – I know I have – why the UUA lists as among the sources of our tradition “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.” Why isn’t this source included in the one immediately preceding it, “Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life?” Why do Judaism and Christianity warrant their own mention? And what is this about the call to love our neighbors as ourselves? Surely this is a call common to all major religions. Why should our Sources single out our Jewish and Christian traditions as the source of this call to love?

The answer is this: We are children of a Judeo-Christian culture. Its symbols and language are our symbols and language. Its history is our history, quite literally. Whether or not we grew up in a Jewish or Christian family, we are all shaped by these traditions and the assumptions that underlie them – whether or not we actively accept or reject those assumptions. We may or may not believe in the God of our fathers and mothers, but we cannot escape that pervasive understanding of the Divine.

What’s more, our very own tradition, our Unitarian Universalism, grew out of the Protestant faith, which grew out of the Catholic faith, which grew out of the Jewish faith, and our shared values incorporate the wisdom of these living faiths.

From Judaism, we inherit our monotheism – the belief that God is one. Whatever we understand to govern the universe – Ultimate Reality, Nature, a Supreme Being or an unnamable force – or if we believe that the universe is ungoverned, that it is random, chaotic and purposeless – whatever we believe to be true must apply to all. Not that everyone must conceive of God in the same way, but that, regardless of the images used to understand Ultimate Reality, the same reality pervades the universe. Our Jewish heritage gave us our Unitarianism.

And from Judaism, we inherit our tradition of questioning received wisdom, of debating interpretations and meanings, the tradition of the Talmud, the tradition of embracing complexity and ambiguity, of taking nothing for granted as simple. The truth is not simple, and for this understanding, we have our Jewish inheritance to thank.

Our belief that we are called to prophecy, that we must speak truth to power has deep Jewish roots. The sense that we are responsible to our communities and that we live or die as a community has Jewish roots, as does our focus on justice in this world, in the here and now. Our comfort in and with the things of this life, the belief that life is good and meant to be enjoyed, these derive from our Jewish heritage, as does our notion of covenant, that we are a people held together by mutual agreement and mutual promises.

If our Unitarianism comes from our Jewish parent, our Universalism comes from our Christian one. The idea that we are all in this together – that we share a common fate with all humankind – our Universalist heritage – derives from a revolutionary understanding of God as a loving God that embraces all his or her children, regardless of class, wealth, ethnicity or status.

Our understanding of religion as a source of hope, forgiveness and comfort as well as prophetic vision comes from the story of Jesus. Our embrace of an alternative ideal – a vision of a beloved community that welcomes all, that transcends consumerism and signs of status and encourages us to “be not conformed to the things of this world” is Christian in origin.

Like an angry teenager who, seeking her own identity and independence, reduces her parents to caricatures of themselves and refuses to recognize that they may have any redeeming qualities or any wisdom whatsoever to offer her, we UUs have been known to caricature our Jewish and Christian roots. We have been known to reject their wisdom, their subtleties and complexities, ambiguities and beauty.

But we are growing up.

We are right to affirm that this faith is no place for orthodoxy or superstition. But we can, if we’re not careful, be as orthodox in our own way, hewing to the narrowest of definitions of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. There is, indeed, such a thing as an orthodox humanist, an orthodox atheist, an orthodox Pagan. Some of our congregations – ones I have known and loved – bristle at any mention of Jesus and consider any acknowledgement of scriptural wisdom to be intolerable, mere superstition.

This congregation, I'm happy to say, does not seem to be one of these. But even here, we run the risk of becoming complacent in our very liberalness. I know this is a danger I'm aware of in my own attitudes toward the more conventional and conservative brands of Judaism and Christianity. I have an unattractive tendency to reject what I don't understand – a tendency that is all too common among us imperfect humans.

But here is the beauty of our free faith: We are free to question and to reject, and we are also free to accept – to find value wherever it may reside – whether it is out in the open or hidden in the Biblical passages dear to our ancestors. Even there.

We must be vigilant against our own tendencies to fundamentalism – as vigilant as we are against the fundamentalism of the Religious Right or the extremist forms of Islam. Let us not condemn others for self-righteousness, for their exclusive claims to truth, until we have examined ourselves for these same faults. As Jesus is supposed to have said, “Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?” (Jesus did have a sense of humor.)

I am not a Jew or a Christian and I doubt I ever will be. But I am continually finding commonalities with those who are, and in an effort to enrich my own understanding and deepen my own spiritual life, I seek out those commonalities. I can no longer dismiss all these believers as literalists, just because my earliest exposure to Christians was to those who were literalists. I no longer wonder why a Christian would – or could -- embrace Unitarian Universalism. I understand that not all Christians are creedal or dogmatic. I know that to be a Christian in our UU context does not mean making an exclusive claim to the truth – that UU Christians are free to doubt, to struggle with their faith; that they may embrace Jesus as the way they have chosen to find God without claiming that he is the only way.

I know that to be UU is to welcome not only Pagans and agnostics and atheists and humanists and Buddhists and Muslims into our congregations. It is to welcome not only **former** Christians, not only **secular** Jews, but to welcome believers of all kinds – including people who consider themselves to be active practitioners of these faiths and are still open to finding truth in diversity and value in the questions. People who admit that truth is too large, too complex, too far beyond our grasp, to ever claim that they have found it, all of it, that they are the saved or the preferred or the singular recipient of revelation.

For those whose spirits have been wounded by the intolerance of faith of any stripe, we offer a safe place to heal and to grow. We are a refuge for those who have been told to be quiet, to obey, to believe what they are told, to accept their lot in life. We are home to those who have been told they are wrong, not good enough, not acceptable in God's eyes. We welcome the doubter, the skeptic. We offer a place to those who have been denied the beauty and truth contained in their religious heritage by others who make an exclusive claim on that heritage.

This is our call: to share the “good news” that all are worthy, all are welcome, all are loved. This is our heritage and this is our practice. This is our message. This is the message that the world needs now more than ever. Let us rejoice in the goodness we find in one another and in the potential of us all to be more loving than we now are, to create a world that is more loving. May we be grateful for this heritage. May we honor this heritage.

Amen.