



Who Do We Say He Is?
Adventures in Unitarian Christology, Part I
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From the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 21, verses 18 and 19: “In the morning, as he was returning to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the wayside, he went to it, and found nothing on it but leaves only. And he said to it, ‘May no fruit ever come from you again!’ And the fig tree withered at once.”

What does this story tell us of Jesus? It tells us two things:

- 1) he was not nice.
- 2) we don't understand him.

These are two worthwhile assumptions for embarking on an inquiry into the nature of Jesus. Most people who presume to speak with authority on this topic assume just the opposite. I find that dangerous.

Jesus was not nice. “Nice” people don't curse trees, don't deny their families, don't turn tables upside down and crack whips and chase businesspeople out of the temple. Do they?

We don't understand him. We hardly have enough information about Jesus to write a decent obituary, yet in the past hundred years over *sixty thousand books* have been written about him.

I am frequently asked by newcomers to the Unitarian Universalist faith to explain what we believe about Jesus. There is no single answer to that question; many UU's believe many different things.

Over the past two thousand or so years of Christianity, people have struggled over many issues, such as the nature and extent of clerical authority, the method and meaning of baptism, and communion, and salvation. Many of the disagreements have centered on the question of the nature of Jesus, or what is called Christology.

Early in its history, Church leaders determined that the survival of the Church depended on

boundaries of acceptable belief. Beliefs outside this norm were declared heresies. If you held those opinions, you were excluded from the body of the church.

Our faith as Unitarians and Universalists developed from some of these heresies. The word heresy comes from the Greek *heresis*, meaning to choose. Heretics were those who chose their beliefs, who made up their minds, rather than accept the official, decreed dogma.

When it got to the point that folks said, “I say that Jesus is the prince of peace, and if you don't believe it, I'll kill you,” our forebears were among those who had to run. Or die.

By looking at a few historical figures and what they believed about Jesus, we can observe the development of those beliefs within our religious movement. To know our faith, we must keep alive the stories of our spiritual ancestors, this household of heretics who struggled and died that our free faith might live.

First, the earliest Christians. They were a Jewish sect — the original “Jews for Jesus.” Led by James, the brother of Jesus, they followed Jewish law, and worshiped in the Temple at Jerusalem. They were distinguished from other Jews primarily in that they believed that the prophecies of the coming Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus. They would not have thought of asserting the divinity of Jesus — that was clearly blasphemy! Observant Jews, they knew that “the Lord thy God is One.”

In the year 70 of the Common Era the Jews revolted against Roman rule. The Roman's crushing response included destruction of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem. The original band of Jewish Christians seems to have disappeared in this conflagration.

But by this time the majority of Christians did not live in Jerusalem, but were scattered in cities throughout the Roman Empire. These cities were Hellenistic for the most part, dominated by Greek culture and philosophy. As Christianity developed, it was influenced by some of these Greek ideas.

By the end of the first century, the understanding of Jesus as the messiah, or Christ, had incorporated the Greek philosophical conception of the *Logos*. The Gospel of John begins with the statement, “In the beginning was the word, (*logos* in Greek,) and the Word was with God and the Word was God.” This *Logos* was a kind of intermediary between the infinite and holy deity and the world of humans. Over time, the Christ figure became identified with the *Logos*, though the exact meaning of this was a problem which occupied the best theological minds for centuries.

Up until the fourth century, various doctrines were held concerning the nature of Jesus. There were the Ebionites who taught that Jesus was fully human. Gnostics taught that *Jesus* was a man united with *Christ* the God. Sabellians said that Jesus *was* God. And of course, the ever-popular Manicheans taught that Satan had imprisoned bits of divine light in our brains and Jesus, the Buddha, and *their* very own prophet Mani were sent to earth to liberate our imprisoned brain-light bits. Regardless of their views, all Christians in the Empire treated equally. They were equally imprisoned, tortured, and killed by the Roman power structure.

This situation changed when the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity around the

year 312. The story is told that, riding into battle, he had a vision of a cross and the words “by this sign you shall conquer.” Conquer he did, and, regardless of stories of signs and wonders, he understood that Christianity could be a force to unify his far-flung empire.

Constantine's plan for world-domination was undermined by theological squabbling. For Christianity to fulfill its function as a unifying force, conformity had to be imposed. The first major theological conflict Constantine had to face was the contention between factions led by Arius and Athanasius.

The conflict began in Alexandria, Egypt, the intellectual center of the empire. With the largest library in the world, Alexandria was a scholar magnet—drawing the best and brightest and the most ambitious thinkers.

It was here that Arius, a popular and somewhat left-leaning radical priest, got into a smackdown with Alexander—the establishment figure—the Bishop of Alexandria.

Alexander preached sermons which seemed to identify Jesus and God as one entity. This sounded suspiciously like *Sabellianism*, which was rejected by respected church leaders. Arius was offended to hear these views expressed from the pulpit.

Arius understood and taught that Jesus was a creature, *created* by and *subordinate* to God. In his view, Jesus, a child of God, possessed free will, and was capable of sin; that he struggled as you or I for wisdom and compassion. This view infuriated Alexander, and his protégé Athanasius, who believed that God the Father and God the Son were the same, *exactly* the same, existing together from the beginning of time. That darn Logos concept!

Arius [spell it – nothing to do with Hitler and the Aryan race spelled with a Y]. Anyway, Arius was said to be tall, handsome, and possessed of a sweet, impressive voice. An eloquent preacher, and an able educator, he possessed the gift of making these issues important to the person on the street, not just of concern to intellectuals.

Edward Gibbon describes the scene like this: “The city is full of mechanics and slaves, who are all of them profound theologians, and preach in the shops and on the streets. If you desire a man to change a piece of silver, he informs you wherein the Son differs from the father; if you ask the price of a loaf, you are told by way of reply that the Son is inferior to the Father; and if you inquire whether the bath is ready, the answer is that the Son was made out of nothing.” (MacMullen)

The debate spread far beyond Alexandria. Alexander sent angry letters to various other bishops, sometimes seventy copies at a time. Arius wrote his ideas into songs set to popular tunes, and they were spread by sailors, millers, travelers throughout the empire. (MacMullen) Gangs of violent thugs formed on each side of the question, fighting it out in the streets.

It is difficult for us to imagine the passions aroused by this debate, it sounds so esoteric. Constantine himself, faced with letters from the disputants, who urged him to intercede, wrote to both parties, scolding them. “Stop this bickering,” he said, “the question is devoid of importance!”

Bickering continued. To stop it, Constantine called a meeting.

This was the council that met in Nicaea, a resort town not far from the Black Sea, in what is now Turkey. They met in the month of May—in the year 325. Over three hundred Bishops, plus priests, deacons and retainers attended. One story is told that Constantine paid their way to Nicea, but upon their arrival they were told they could not leave until they reached agreement.

Another story told is that when the meeting opened, the bishops approached the throne of Constantine, each placing his petition in the royal lap, the petitions differing from the preceding in some fine theological point, until Constantine, enraged, leapt to his feet and demanded that all the petitions be piled in the center of the great hall and burned.

The debate wore on for a month—exhausting everyone. They came close to agreement on a statement of belief, a creed, except for one point. The crux of the disagreement came to center upon the word, *homoousion*.

The creed stated that Jesus and God were *homoousion*—or of one substance. The Arian faction were willing to compromise with the word *homoiousion*, which is a bit more ambiguous. *Homoiousion* can mean either... exactly the same, or... well, kinda the same.

The compromise would have made peace, and allowed for some diversity of opinion within the church. Debate raged. Later, it has been said that the council was convulsed by a diphthong, or that the fate of Christianity was decided on the basis of an iota — it was literally the Greek letter “iota” which separated the two sides.

The Athanasian party caucused, lobbied, found that it had the votes to defeat the compromise, forced the issue, and won. The resulting creedal statement, called the Athanasian or the Nicene creed, is still recited today in many Christian churches today, begins with “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. . .” it goes on to state that Jesus was begotten, not made, and of one substance (*homoousion*) with the Father. Then they took a minor Biblical concept, the Holy Spirit, and added it to the mix—coming up with a huge source of future conflict, the Trinity.

All but two bishops accepted the creed, and those two, along with Arius, were banished to the desert.

A good title for the story of the next seventy years would be “Reversal of Fortune.” First, Arius was rehabilitated, when a follower, Eusebius, became Constantine's advisor. The emperor called Arius back and exiled Athanasius.

Arius died that year, but fortunes continued to reverse for the two factions. *Five times in all* Athanasius was exiled then exonerated; five times — first one party, then the other held sway. It wasn't until the year 395 that the Nicene orthodoxy finally prevailed.

For the next four hundred years, however, Arian missionaries spread throughout the empire, converting the Goths, Visigoths and Ostrogoths, spreading throughout Italy, Spain, and Eastern Europe. And their heresy continued to surface, influencing the development of the

Unitarian churches which formed in Poland and Transylvania during the Reformation, twelve hundred years later. I'll address this development in a future sermon.

The council of Nicea was a defining event for Christianity. One result was that it significantly strengthened the power of the Church. *Homoousius* appears no where in the Bible. With the introduction of a non-scriptural word into the creed, the Church claimed for itself an authority above that of Scripture. It was this claim which *led* to the Reformation, the break between Catholicism and Protestantism.

Another result is that the council gave birth to *Christendom*—from Church to Empire. The council marked the transition of Christianity from a *target* of persecution to a *source* of persecution — the result of unholy alliance of Church and State. Its demand for a narrow Orthodoxy led directly to the Inquisition – thousands upon thousands of people, exiled, tortured or killed.

Primarily, though, this story is important because the disagreement between Arius and Athanasius never died. In later sermons, we will see that it was central to the debate between Augustine and Pelagius in the fifth century. It had fatal consequences for Michael Servetus at the hands of John Calvin in 1553, and it led to the death of Francis David in Transylvania in 1579. In 1843 it was the issue that motivated the Boston Association of Unitarian ministers to ask Theodore Parker to leave. And, as late as 1948, it informed the decision of the World Council of Churches, an association of over 300 churches, to refuse to admit the Unitarians into membership.

The disagreement has never died. At its heart, the question concerns, not Christology, or the nature of Jesus, so much as it concerns *soteriology*, or the nature of salvation.

On one side of the question are those who believe that the significance of Jesus is his divine nature as the Christ. Salvation is possible because the divine Christ came to earth, and humans can save themselves from hell only through the through belief *in*, and agency *of* this Christ.

On the other side of the question are those who see Jesus as *pointing* the way, not *being* the way. They see salvation as the result, not of belief and divine intervention, but of choice and free will.

One side says that Jesus is God, and the power comes from God to us. The other side says Jesus was human, that he struggled with choices between good and evil, and chose good; a child of God showing us how we can become more fully children of God.

One centers on the power of god, the other on the power within, and among, and beyond us. One is about the *other* world, and one centers on *this* world. One is about the afterlife, and one focuses on this life.

As UU's, as heretics, we choose. We make up our own minds as to which path we will follow.

At seminary, I studied the history of the early Christian church with a professor who was a

Jesuit nun. I much enjoyed working with her — she had a brilliant, passionate, and disciplined mind. And she was quite clear that she stood with the orthodox Church in this struggle.

In a discussion of the Arians and the Athanasians, she illustrated the difference on the blackboard. On one side of the board, for the Athanasian approach, she drew a horizontal line representing the horizon, then two vertical arrows: an arrow from the sky pointing down to the horizon line, and a smaller arrow from the horizon pointing upward.

On the other side of the board, representing the Arian approach, the arrows were reversed. Now the large arrow was located at the horizon, pointing toward the sky, and the smaller arrow pointed from the sky toward earth.

On the Athanasian side, the force, the power, the movement, was primarily from God down to humanity — the large arrow representing Christ coming to earth.

On the Arian side, the large arrow represented the upward striving of humanity: their struggles, their determination, their devout prayers and fervent effort to serve love and justice.

These contrasting images illustrate to me the fundamental difference between the Unitarian impulse and the orthodox. It is at the root of the conflict which has played out with such tragedy and triumph in our history.

I would, however, draw it a little differently. The orthodox image I would leave the same, the vertical arrows, one from God downward to humanity, and the small arrow moving upward. It seems to be accurate. I offer all respect to those who choose this religious path.

For our approach I would want the image to convey that the dimension of the holy is not only vertical.

I would draw it with arrows moving upward, downward, and horizontally, and diagonally! to signify that our religious impulse, our striving, and our effort tends outward toward all and inward from all; arrows in all directions to honor the interdependent web which links us in a holy relationship with all existence.

This indeed is our striving.
This is our effort.
This is our salvation.

May it be so. Amen.