

READING from *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, by Marcus Borg

The historical Jesus was a spirit person, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God. The older, semi-technical term is holy man, but spirit person seems better. Spirit persons are known cross-culturally. They are people who have vivid and subjective experiences of another level or dimension of reality. These experiences involve momentary entry into nonordinary states of consciousness and take a number of different forms. Sometimes there is a vivid sense of momentarily seeing into another layer of reality; this is the classic experience of the shaman. Sometimes there is a strong sense of another reality coming upon one, as in the ancient expression, “The Spirit fell upon me.” Sometimes the experience is of nature or an object within nature momentarily transfigured by “the sacred” shining through it.

What all persons who have these experiences share is a strong sense of there being more to reality than the tangible world of our ordinary experience. Spirit persons are people who experience the sacred frequently and vividly.

The modern worldview, derived from the Enlightenment, sees reality in material terms, as constituted by the world of matter and energy within the space-time continuum. The experience of spirit persons suggests that there is more to reality than this – that there is, in addition to the tangible world of our ordinary experience, a nonmaterial level of reality, actual even though nonmaterial, and charged with energy and power.

Moreover, this other reality, it is important to emphasize, is not “somewhere else.” Rather it is all around us, and we are in it. . . Jesus was a spirit person.

Universalist Revival

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So, what should we do with Christianity?

It all started with Jesus, the spirit person, one of those who saw clearly into the deeper layers of reality beyond the tangible surface of things. His words still ring true across the millennia – his gospel of love, forgiveness and reconciliation strikes a chord deep within the human heart. Jesus the man, the spirit person, the teacher, challenged the status quo in ways that are still progressive and revolutionary. But what happened on the way from Jesus to Christianity?

Well, simply put, what happened is what almost always happens. The teachings of a deeply spiritual person inspire leaders who pass them on to those who would build institutions, and those who build institutions rarely understand the true nature of the spiritual message they intend to preserve. The Christianity we've inherited contains some of Jesus' original vision, but it carries a lot of other stuff, too. Things like anger and hate and war and judgment, persecution and oppression, things that we can be pretty sure Jesus never intended.

It's like a character said in Woody Allen's movie, *Hannah and Her Sisters*, "If Jesus Christ came back today and saw all the things that were being committed in his name, he would never stop throwing up."

So what do we do with Christianity? There are many who would like to toss it into the dustbin of history, leave it behind, shake its dust off our sandals and find a new way forward.

There are also many who continue to believe in Christianity, its message and its promise. But here the question arises: which Christianity? There are hundreds of versions, many claiming to be the only true ones, competing for our patronage in America's spiritual marketplace. This noisy variety, coupled with the fact that we now live in a world of many religious faiths, not just Christianity, makes it hard to take any of them seriously as the only truth.

And then there are the new radical atheists who claim that all religions are just excuses for bad behavior and that we would be better off without them. As compelling as this claim sometimes appears, it asks us to overlook a fundamental fact of human nature: we tend to form our identities based on the groups to which we belong and oppose others with contrasting identities. Simply put, people can use absolutely anything as an excuse to fight. Religion isn't the cause; it's just an accomplice.

And if we look carefully at the major religions that have emerged in the last 2500 years or so, we see a unifying feature responding to this problem. They call us to live together in peace, love, and harmony. Again, it's only human nature that people have twisted these ideals of peace, love, and harmony into reasons for hate, persecution, and war, but the underlying teachings are there. People just tend to say, more or less, "but it couldn't really mean *that!*"

But if we look deeply at our Western culture, we can clearly see that it is based on the teachings of Christianity, for good or ill. Our morality is rooted in the stories of the Christian Bible. Even if we reject Christianity, we're still left with its underlying message. And, of course, there are strikingly different interpretations as to what that message is and how it should be followed and/or enforced.

So, as much as many would like, we can't just get rid of Christianity – so what do we do with it? I suggest that we re-examine Christianity, its sources, its history, its message, with the goal of reclaiming what is good and letting go of the rest. This effort matches that of the great 19th century Unitarian minister, Theodore Parker, who wrote, in his sermon on *The Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, that Christianity is no simple, single thing; that it has changed radically at various times in history, so much so that it needs a special effort to discern what it's all about. His method was to examine this history and discard everything that had changed, the “transient,” and look at those things that had not changed, the “permanent.”

Though not the first to do so, Parker's introduction of critical thinking into the study of religion had a profound effect on the emerging Unitarian faith. He pointed out that, for one thing, Christianity suffered from an undue reliance on the person of Jesus. He said that, “It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.”

Parker saw that the emphasis on Jesus as authority turned his words into the commands of an autocrat rather than the gentle teachings of a person who insisted that he was nothing special.

Leo Tolstoy who, like Thomas Jefferson, had created his own version of the New Testament that excluded all the supernatural claims, influenced me in my own journey in applying critical thinking to Christianity. Tolstoy's called his version *The Gospel in Brief*, and it presented a powerful portrait of a spiritual teacher whose profound message didn't need any authority beyond its own wisdom.

I was so liberated by this discovery some forty years ago that I thought I could call myself a Christian – after all, I agreed with his spiritual teachings! But when I shared this with my Christian friends, they told me I was wrong. They said that Christianity required a belief in the doctrine and creeds, not just the words of Jesus. I was disappointed, but felt that I was in good enough company with Tolstoy and Jefferson.

Many years later when I studied early Christianity, I learned that there had been many views and interpretations of the life and teachings of Jesus, most of them radically different from the versions we've inherited.

Early Christianity was so diverse, in fact, that it's probably overreaching to call it a single religion – there were many Christianities. Jesus' teachings were shared by word of mouth, and interpretations varied according to people's various points of view. Many early Christians spent their whole lives, even five or ten generations of lives, never seeing or hearing anything we would recognize as a book of the Bible. Hand-written copies of teachings like the "Sermon on the Mount" would circulate and provide all that people knew of Jesus. Another such collection was called "The Gospel of Thomas," a collection of powerful spiritual teachings that was later suppressed by the writers of the Gospels. In fact, there's clear evidence that the character of the disciple called "doubting Thomas" was concocted in an attempt to discredit the collection named for him.

And then, about 200 CE, a Bishop named Origen of Alexandria wrote a statement on Jesus that was widely accepted as the true meaning of the life of Jesus. I've shared this before, but it bears repeating because it's so different from the versions that came later.

In the beginning, so the story went, God existed peacefully in eternal union with all souls. And then, for some unknowable reason long before the beginning of time, there arose among the souls a desire to separate from God. This desire for independent existence saddened God, who knew that souls could only be fulfilled in joyous union with their creator. But God loved the souls and wanted to help them learn this difficult truth. So, out of sadness and compassion, God created the Earth as a place where souls could be born and taste separate existence, eventually to learn that their fate and destiny was to be reunited with God.

However, when the souls separated from God, there was one loyal soul that remained united. And that one faithful soul was born as Jesus in order to teach people the way back to their true home in the loving embrace of their creator.

This sweet story of divine love provided the first unifying theme for Christianity. Notice that it is truly universal: all souls came from God and all would eventually be reunited – none damned, none lost.

But people, being people, did what people do. They found ways to disagree with one other. They made literal interpretations of ideas that were intended only as suggestions, spiritual metaphors. They formed groups based on those disagreements and fought for what they believed to be the truth. Origen's version was condemned and then reaffirmed a number of times in the back-and-forth of emerging Christian theology.

And then came the Romans. Although Alexandria, Egypt had been the seat of early Christianity, Rome took over when Constantine declared Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire. But Christianity needed a number of tweaks in order to be a fitting religion for a military dictatorship.

What did Christianity need? Well, it needed to be more like the Roman Empire. So it needed to regard itself as unique, exclusive and superior to all other teachings, which, up to that point, it had not. It also needed to have a mechanism for swift and certain punishment for misbehavior. The Romans pretty much killed everyone who gave them trouble. So Roman Christianity incorporated hell and eternal punishment into their doctrines.

Then there was the problem of what to do with Jesus. There was some concern that his authority might challenge that of Caesar, so the solution was that Jesus was just like Caesar – both a god and a man. This was a well-established formula in the ancient world and it seemed reasonable enough at the time. But then the Roman Empire fell, Caesar disappeared along with his divinity, and Jesus was left standing as the only unique combination of god and human, giving Christianity that disembodied authority figure that troubled Theodore Parker and many others, including me.

And these doctrines became frozen in time even as history unfolded. Most strands of the Protestant Reformation accepted them even as they disagreed about other things. Sectarianism and violence became the rule rather than the exception.

But there were exceptions, of course. Pietists and Anabaptists emphasized the depths of the heart over the rigidness of doctrine. Quakers focused more on the inner light within each person. Unitarians elevated the inherent worth of each individual and Universalists focused on love.

Of course, Universalism was viewed broadly as an immoral idea because it did away with the punishments of hell. People thought that there wouldn't be any reason for morality without the threat of punishment. Sigh . . . so long is the reach of

the attitudes of the Roman Empire. Gentle early Christianity had no need for ideas of eternal punishment.

Universalism emerged as a movement in England in the 18th century with the teachings of John Rely, whose disciple, John Murray, brought Universalism to America. Early Universalism accepted most Christian theology as a given, but interpreted Jesus' sacrificial death as the redemption of all people everywhere for all time. This left Jesus' exceptional divinity in place while asserting the grand embrace of God's love for all, no matter what their actions or beliefs.

This is the version that quickly took hold in early America, but was eventually supplanted by an even wider extension of God's embrace through the interpretation of the farm boy-turned minister-turned theologian, Hosea Ballou. His *Treatise on Atonement* changed the course of Universalist theology by doing away with sin altogether!

Ballou said that, since God is love, there is and never could have been the possibility of punishment or hell and so Jesus' life and death were not the game-changers others had claimed. This was a return to Origen's original Christian story of a soul born to teach us the way back to fulfillment through unity with our divine Source.

Thomas Harpur, in his book, *For Christ's Sake* pointed out something about Jesus that has often been overlooked.

He said that Jesus was a prophet of love and inclusivity, of justice and healing. His reforms of Judaism were in the form of a critique against excessive legalism. Jesus preached a religion based on inner honesty and pure love. He wanted to encourage people to move away from empty, outward forms of piety and observance, and move inward to a spiritual renewal based on the assurance that all

human beings are equal and precious in God's sight. Jesus made it a special point to accept and extend care and healing to those considered ritually unclean by Jewish and Roman purity laws.

A close examination of these teachings reveals that Jesus was a humanist! His emphasis on the value of the individual was a radical move in those days when only the powerful were considered important.

His teachings led people to free themselves from Roman and Jewish attitudes that diminished their worth – and this was truly revolutionary! And he clearly extended that freedom by teaching that God did not judge or condemn them, that all would be welcome into the embrace of divine healing love.

This is pure Universalism, and Unitarian Universalists need it.

You see, we came out of a New England religious tradition rife with judgmentalism. This produced a culture where people needed to prove their worth – whether to God or to each other – through their actions. This created a culture of guilt and anxiety – no one ever knew if they were quite good enough. Fortunately, this theology did have an escape clause: God's forgiveness, which could come into play even if it was neither earned nor deserved. So there was hope along with fear.

But when we rejected the judgmental version of a God that behaved like a demonic Santa Clause watching our every move for a slip-up, we also did away with the concept of forgiveness, of grace, of atonement and reconciliation.

So Unitarian Universalists are often left with an implicitly unforgiving theology based on the need to do something in order to be worthwhile, which can nurture a deeply fearful anxiety about whether we're good enough, to be especially sensitive to criticism of others and even tending to judge ourselves harshly.

This tendency to judge others and ourselves is a heavy burden for us to carry. It can harden us and lead us into struggles for self-esteem compounded with hostility toward those who think differently.

Another odd consequence of this is that we tend to think that the best way to be considerate of one another is to avoid expecting anything from them. Although cloaked with the image of generosity, this is actually disempowering and corrosive to developing a healthy sense of community.

We need to find a way to be free of these burdens and I think that a revival of Universalism can give us just what we need: forgiveness, grace, and compassion. It can free us from the need to judge ourselves, from an unrelenting struggle to make the world fit our expectations.

All the great spirit teachers, including Jesus, have pointed out that happiness and fulfillment are not to be found in the material world. In proclaiming that God is love, they are telling us that the true nature of existence – of the universe – is something other than accomplishment and survival. They don't try to tell us that we shouldn't do good in the world; in fact, they say the opposite. They just tell us that there is a liberating heaven-full of joy and happiness available right in the here and now if we are willing to open our hearts to receive it. This Universalism is at the heart of our tradition and history, but it's been neglected and needs to be resuscitated. Are we ready for a Universalist revival today? What would it be like to be free of that burden of having to be right? That burden of being the one who knows that other people are wrong? That burden of knowing that we messed up, that we're not good enough. We carry so many burdens. Let's open our hearts to the joy all around us and lay those burdens down.

May it be so.