

An Undivided Faith

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I am glad to be a part of Unitarian Universalism at a time when we are reasserting our identity as spiritual beings and when the congruity of Christian faith and Unitarian Universalist belief is often asserted. I am pleased by the efforts of Christopher Hinkle and Sarah Stewart to highlight this congruity and to provide an apology for it. In the interest of furthering this effort I intend to provide certain critiques of their articles. Both of these articles describe the familiar cultural form of Christianity and propose ways in which a Christian vocabulary suits or at the least fails to disrupt Unitarian Universalist theology and practice. However in this emphasis, both Hinkle and Stewart risk reducing Christianity to something hollow and incomplete, an exchangeable set of stories and practices. While broadly my critique is of both papers, I will deal more explicitly with Stewart's work and as she does offer some thoughts on hymnody as it is relevant to discussions of the place of Christianity with respect to Unitarian Universalism. My desire is to relocate the beginning point for a discussion of Unitarian Universalist Christianity away from the outward signs of Christian commitment to the commitments themselves.

My Christian faith, which is doctrinally Unitarian Universalist (God is one, none can be separated from the love of God, and religion should be primarily concerned with actions in this world, not another), can be expressed first as a passionate conviction that Jesus' words and deeds reveal essential truths as to the nature of God and function of religion, and further as a desire to submit to the way of Christian living as exemplified by Jesus and taught by the apostles and the church. This awkwardly worded statement of faith arises out of an encounter with God I am unwilling to excuse as a mere result of environmental influences. I am therefore dissatisfied with the terms of the discourse set by my colleagues. They seem to position Christianity too much as a language or symbol-set which may allow access to some deeper universal truth. I cannot so easily separate the words from the meaning. God as preached by Jesus is the universal around which my religious practice grows and takes shape. It is not that I find the message of Jesus helpful in articulating the universal themes of liberalism which Hinkle enumerates; rather that message is the embodiment and the source of those truths and their coinciding commitments.

Therefore, as provocative and useful as Hinkle's guiding question is – namely whether or not Christianity is a sufficient religious way, even when we stop experiencing it personally or culturally as a necessity – it remains one that I cannot fully engage. I do view Christianity as necessary to my faith. Jesus preached the living God and a way to follow that God which I hold to be universal and true. Still, I would no more employ this conviction to proscribe the faith another must adopt than I would employ my conviction

that no human being genuinely desires to be alone by pushing everyone to marry. My apprehension of both God and human psychology are far too limited to permit such arrogance.

Discussions of Unitarian Universalist Christianity should begin, I argue, with God's call to religious living. In this way we go to the heart of the matter. This call is what binds faith communities. Taking this as my starting point, I then bring my Christianity into my Unitarian Universalist congregation. I am there because I am a Christian. Any dichotomy of my Unitarian Universalism and my Christianity would be imprecise and artificial. Here I stand against the descriptions of Unitarian Universalist Christianity proposed by Stewart and Hinkle. Stewart understands Unitarian Universalism as intentionally multi-religious and therefore depicts a Christian voice as necessary to the larger project of diversity. But diversity should not, I argue, be a project or ideal unto itself. Rather liberalism's commitment to a theological humility tends to produce such diversity. Diversity is a symptom of this humility in practice. To the extent we can achieve unanimity of thought and practice I believe we should aspire to it. Our prized diversity of thought can, at it's best, be an outgrowth of our metaphysical humility and epistemological openness, but at worst it is a consequence of our cowardice, a cowardice endemic within liberalism. We confuse the valuation of individuals with the questionable discipline of non-offense. Thus much of our diversity results from a lack of accountability in our faith communities and an unwillingness to demand theological consistency and rigor of our members. Maximizing diversity does not necessarily lead to maximum valuation of the human individual and certainly does not produce the maximum fruits of justice and spiritual growth.

What I am suggesting, is that discussions of Unitarian Universalist Christian faith not fall prey to the very dichotomous thinking which Stewart (with Derrida) sets out to combat. Just as we no longer speak of gender, sexual orientation, and race as if these were independent categories of our existence, we must not assume a clean distinction between what it might mean to be a Unitarian Universalist and a Christian, or like Hinkle treat the latter as a potential overlay for the former. I concede that the fact that many Christians are not Unitarian Universalists and many Unitarian Universalists are not Christians might lead us to want to flesh out a neat distinction and believe that such a distinction is possible. I also concede that there is a temptation to respond to the occasional coincidence of Unitarian Universalist and Christian faith as a chicken and the egg problem - that is to ask which came first, or which is primary. There may be some like Hinkle for whom a Unitarian Universalist Christian identity represents both a primary identity and a secondary overlay, but the more natural interpretation would seem to take Unitarian Universalism and Christianity as inseparable and equally necessary descriptions of a single lived religious identity.

Both Stewart and Hinkle have bemoaned the hostility of many Unitarian Universalists to Christian practices. Stewart in particular identifies the ways in which Unitarian Universalists have attempted to distance ourselves from Christianity, and so have allowed others to define it, arguing that we should not so willingly abdicate this responsibility. I do however disagree with Stewart about how exactly this abdication has taken place and

who has filled the role of oppressor in this development. I would like to suggest that Evangelicals have not taken Christianity hostage so much as they have had their own Christian faith taken hostage by media forces.

Stewart is, I believe, a victim of a false dichotomy that sets up Unitarian Universalists and evangelicals as opposites. It is easy to believe there is great dissimilarity between evangelical Christians and Unitarian Universalists. After all, on almost any social issue we find ourselves at opposite sides of a cultural war that has been raging for years. Yet part of living a commitment to Unitarian Universalist Christianity requires recognizing both the strengths and vulnerabilities we share with specifically Christian groups. If we look at these two religious bodies we see two movements that are both powerfully rooted in American ideals of individualism and civic spirit. Both of our religious movements espouse and practice the belief that each individual can discern the will of God. We are both fierce adherents to congregational polity. Because of this fierce congregationalism and the consequent absence of centralized and enduring authorities, I believe both groups are particularly vulnerable to media influences. Both Unitarian Universalists and Evangelicals, in the absence of a clear and sophisticated denominational structure and lacking any binding creeds, often leave the work of theology to authors, film makers, etc. whose market is broad. Recently Time wrote on the dangers facing American evangelicals in that they are so enmeshed in the multimillion-dollar Christian entertainment industry. For evangelicals theology is done on the best-seller rack and has been done that way for a long time.

Religious liberals are not so different. There isn't a Unitarian Universalist entertainment industry purse, but we too frequently have our theology worked out in the market place. I see two main sources of influence, the first being the coffee table brand of religious pluralism. UU's thinking about religion and their own faith is greatly influenced by the ubiquitous New Age, self-help books as well as by popular collections which beautifully present selected non-threatening passages from various religious leaders. It is sad that for religious liberals the buyer for Barnes and Nobles is the one setting the curriculum for adult spiritual formation. The other great shaper of religious liberalism is science. Too frequently we rush to assimilate the latest physics theories, genetics work, or ideas in evolutionary biology into our own cosmology, anthropology and metaphysics, naively ignoring the corporate interests that propel and control such an idolatry of scientific knowledge and progress.

Even the obvious political and social chasm between our two associations must be recognized, in part, as yet another example of our linked oppression by the market. After all, our battlegrounds are often set by the media. Issues of public prayer, the nature of sex education in schools, and Nativity scenes on public greens are far from the most pressing issues our world faces, and yet both religious liberals and religious conservatives exert an inordinate amount of energy on these issues. This disproportionate exertion of energy on sexy news bites *is* a way in which those invested in the business of news-making and entertainment help to keep religious bodies engaged in relative irrelevancies. In this way, they prevent liberal and conservative religionists from coming together

against the evils of excessive wealth and rampant poverty in America today, an alliance which again might seriously challenge corporate interests.

It seems to me that this should be the focus of our deconstructionist analysis of the state of Unitarian Universalist Christianity. Furthermore an analysis that refuses to dichotomize evangelical Christianity from Unitarian Universalism and that recognizes the oppression of the media industry is an analysis that better equips us to minister to those coming to Unitarian Universalism from Christianity. Thus understood, our responsibility to individuals hurt by conservative Christianity is to help them to identify the root of that experienced oppression, to claim that which was true in that formative religious experience, and to enter Unitarian Universalism with eyes opened to the similar dogmatic pitfalls within this religious movement.

As we seek to identify the guiding hands of the market and thereby to free ourselves from its grip, and as we open our eyes to our relationship to other religious groups – in particular to evangelical Christians – we will create a culture within Unitarian Universalism that will much more easily embrace the faith of its Christian members and celebrate its Christian origins. Hinkle recommends that Unitarian Universalists adopt Christian language and traditions as vessels from which universal experiences can be imbibed, and so presumably would encourage the continued use of traditional Christian hymns. Stewart addresses the point explicitly, seeking to preserve Christianity (and Christian hymns by example) as a distinct voice within the pluralism of Unitarian Universalism. My own unwillingness to distinguish Christianity as a form distinct from Unitarian Universalism leads me, by contrast, to seek a more living and dynamic Christian practice.

Stewart is dismayed at the lack of parity in our current hymnal's treatment of Christian hymns and music from other religious traditions, a difference she attributes to an inappropriate hostility towards Christianity. I interpret the discrepancy differently. The fact that a Jewish song would not be linguistically or theologically tweaked is not so much an expression of respect for that tradition as an unfortunate expression of distance and an assertion of that tradition's irrelevance for our own religious lives. We are less sensitive about singing theologically inauthentic music when that music is perceived as either borrowed (as is the case with Jewish songs and Black Spirituals where Unitarian Universalists are very willing to look for partial theological fits and ignore the differences) or if the music is sufficiently established as historically significant and thus worthy of memorialization. Stewart's own research demonstrates this. She provides evidence that most UU's would rather simply sing the version of "Joy to the World" they hear at the department store or have heard in a more traditionally Christian Church. Singing the familiar version allows them to keep that song and Christmas itself as something warm, unthreatening, and easily commodified. To change the words asks people to make the song their own, that is to engage in faithful expression rather than a static preservation which signals its own irrelevance.

This brings us back to the larger question of the dichotomy between Christianity and Unitarian Universalism. If "Christian" hymns are to be preserved in the "Christian"

format, then who exactly are the Christians here? Ironically, it seems that only those Christians who are not Unitarian or Universalist will be allowed to revise and reinvigorate the Christian hymns and traditions. Christians have always rewritten their hymns to reflect current theological positions. If Unitarian Universalism is to be a home for Christians, and if it is possible for Unitarian Universalists to be Christian, then our revisions of hymns are also potentially Christian revisions just as our interpretations of scripture are also potentially Christian interpretations.

The reassertion of a Christian voice within Unitarian Universalism is an exciting thing. But we who hold a Unitarian Universalist Christian theology must be mindful how we lift up that voice. I would have my faith heard most loudly in how I lead my life. Do I welcome the stranger and provide food for the hungry? Do I live as one who is a child of the living God? Am I a friend of righteousness? I fear that Unitarian Universalist Christians spend far too much time worrying over whether they can still be Unitarian Universalist and sing hymns about Jesus, or address prayers to God from the pulpit, or light Advent candles. Hymns, rites, even the names given to God are relatively inconsequential to the Christian message compared to the demands on one's life as a member of the kingdom of God. The question as I see it must be this, when Unitarian Universalist Christians, called by God, divest themselves of financial holdings, take in the orphaned and elderly, take up residence with the oppressed, refuse violence as a solution to conflict, and dedicate themselves to forthright communication, will they find support from their Unitarian Universalist tradition and congregation?