

The Origins of Unitarianism
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The Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota

Opening Words, Rev. Fritts:

I stand before you as a new minister, joining with you to serve this community. It is a new beginning for me and a new beginning in the life of this church. However, there are no pure beginnings, only continuations, lives flowing into lives, ages flowing into ages. This church and this religion are part of a great search for understanding that stretches back over time. I join with all of you to respect and build on the work of the past and to add to our understanding of life. In this spirit, I invite you to join in singing our opening hymn.

First Reading from Unitarian Christianity by William Ellery Channing:

We believe in the doctrine of God's UNITY, or that there is one God, and one only. To this truth we give infinite importance, and we feel ourselves bound to take heed, lest any man spoil us of it by vain philosophy. The proposition that there is one God seems to us exceedingly plain. We understand by it that there is one being, one mind, one person, one intelligent agent, and one only . . . We do, then, with all earnestness, though without reproaching our brethren, protest against the irrational and unscriptural doctrine of the Trinity.

Reading From The Da Vinci Code Chapter 55

Teabing During this fusion of religions, Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition, and held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea. At this gathering, many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon—the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of sacraments, and, of course, the divinity of Jesus.

Sophie I don't follow. His divinity?

Teabing My dear, until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet... a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal.

Sophie Not the Son of God?

Teabing Right. Jesus' establishment as 'the Son of God' was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.

Sophie Hold on. You're saying Jesus' divinity was the result of a vote?

Teabing A relatively close vote at that. Nonetheless, establishing Christ's divinity was critical to the further unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base. By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable. This not only precluded further pagan challenges to Christianity but now the followers of Christ were able to redeem themselves only via the established sacred channel—the Roman Catholic Church.

Teabing continued It was all about power. Christ as Messiah was critical to the functioning of Church and state. Many scholars claim that the early Church literally stole Jesus from His original followers, hijacking His human message, shrouding it in an impenetrable cloak of divinity, and using it to expand their own power. I've written several books on the topic.

Sophie And I assume devout Christians send you hate mail on a daily basis?

Teabing Why would they? The vast majority of educated Christians know the history of their faith. Jesus was indeed a great and powerful man. Constantine's underhanded political maneuvers don't diminish the majesty of Christ's life. Nobody is saying Christ was a fraud, or denying that He walked the earth and inspired millions to better lives. All we are saying is that Constantine took advantage of Christ's substantial influence and importance. And in doing so, he shaped the face of Christianity as we know it today.

Langdon An interesting note. Anyone who chose the forbidden gospels over Constantine's version was deemed a heretic. The word heretic derives from that moment in history. The Latin word *haereticus* means 'choice.' Those who 'chose' the original history of Christ were the world's first heretics.

Sermon

Unitarianism is an old religion. It was not created overnight. It did not appear suddenly in the last few years. This religious movement has been part of western culture a long time. Men and women with courage created it. They were willing to make great sacrifices for their beliefs.

Yet often Unitarians are ignorant of our own history. It has something to do with our openness to change and our excitement about the future. The latest discovery of science draws our attention. The past seems less important.

Nevertheless, it is good to understand our roots. It gives us a foundation on which to build. It gives us perspective, so that we are less likely to be victims of fads and fashions. One historian put it this way: "It is a curious error to suppose you can carry on effectively a great liberal tradition when remaining at the same time ignorant, or almost ignorant, of the beliefs and achievements of the people who have handed that tradition over to you."

So this morning at the beginning of a new ministry, I want to tell a story about a time seventeen hundred years ago. The story took place in the ancient cities along the Mediterranean coast. It is a story about a theological controversy that shaped the development of religion.

When the disciples of Jesus first established the Christian church a few years after the death of Jesus, its organization was loose. It consisted mainly of small groups of people. Leaders and priests arose from within the small groups. Over 300 years the pagan rulers of the Roman Empire persecuted the Christians.

This persecution stopped almost exactly seventeen hundred years ago. In October of the year 312, the son of a former Roman Emperor, a man named Constantine, marched on Rome, intent on seizing power. We know little about Constantine's early religious views, only that at some point when he was young, he became sympathetic to Christianity.

According to legend, while on the march toward Rome, Constantine and his soldiers saw a flaming cross in the sky, accompanied by the words in Latin "by this conquer." The following night Constantine said that he had a dream in which Jesus appeared, showed him the sign of the cross, and told him to inscribe it on his soldier's flags. Therefore, Constantine commanded his army to replace their old pagan symbols with the Christian symbol. The siege of Rome was successful and he became the ruler of the Western half of the Roman Empire. A year later, in 313, he ended the persecution of Christians by the Romans,

legalized Christian worship, and began to use Christianity as a tool for uniting the Roman Empire.

One Christian priest who benefitted from Constantine's decision to legitimize Christianity was a man named Arius. Arius was born in Libya, probably around the year 260.

Arius was in his mid 50s when in 314 the local bishop appointed him to serve as the parish priest in a church near the harbor of Alexandria. Arius was a tall, slender, gray-haired man. His congregation greatly admired him for his personal purity. He was popular among sailors, dockworkers and young women who flocked to his church.

A key to his popularity is that Arius had developed the skill of writing in verse. His sermons were rhyming poems, rhyming songs. He would sing or chant these sermons to his congregation, and many would memorize the words. The sailors then carried them to other port cities, singing or chanting Arius' words around the eastern Mediterranean, spreading his ideas.

One of his poems he called *The Banquet*. In the poem he said that Jesus was a human being of such outstanding moral accomplishments that God adopted Jesus as his son and granted Jesus divine status. The main point of the poem was that Jesus was a real man, who experienced temptation, who suffered on the cross, died the death of a human being. Because of his great accomplishments, God gave Jesus divine status.

How could Jesus be God, Arius asked, when Jesus slept as a human being, wept, and had to learn by asking questions? If Jesus were God, why does it say in John and Matthew that Jesus felt fear and uncertainty? If Jesus were God, why did he pray to God? Finally, Arius asked, if Jesus and God were the same, why on the cross did Jesus say the words "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"

This theological dispute was not merely a debate between clergy. Historians say that ordinary trades people and workers passionately argued about the identity of Jesus, the way today some of us argue about football, basketball and baseball. Those who study the ancient documents estimate that popular opinion was about evenly divided. Half of Christians believe in the humanity of Jesus and half believe that Jesus was God.

At this time, no central authority existed in the Christian church. The debate over the nature of God and Jesus might have continued as a back and forth argument between different factions in the church, except for Constantine. His goal was to unite the Empire's diverse, quarreling peoples into one harmonious religious community. He did not like disagreements that undercut that unity.

In 324, Constantine sent a letter addressed to Arius and to his opponents. The letter observed strict neutrality about the controversy. However, the Emperor made clear that he considered the doctrinal conflict among high-ranking Christians unnecessary and disruptive.

Constantine asked in his letter why good Christians should quarrel over questions that nobody could answer with certainty. He called on the adversaries to reconcile and permit him to return to enjoying trouble-free days and nights of repose.

This appeal was not effective. So to unify the church, Constantine ordered the first meeting in history of the bishops. Constantine decided to hold the council at his summer home on Lake Nicaea. Constantine sent invitations to more than 400 bishops. He not only invited them to his summer home, but also

promised to pay their travel expenses and living expenses during the several months they would be away from their own cities. More than 250 bishops came. The great Council began its deliberations in early June of the year 325.

According to *The Da Vinci Code*, the decision that Jesus was divine was the result of "a relatively close vote." In fact, we do not know this. No minutes or other official records of the proceedings exist. What we know about the Council of Nicaea is based on fragmentary comments by a few of the bishops who attended the meetings and on several documents that church historians copied and preserved.

The bishops met in a large hall of the palace called the judgment hall. They sat on benches arranged in rows running the length of the hall. Constantine himself appeared dressed in purple and seated himself at a slight distance from the bishops, but close enough to participate in their discussions.

At the beginning, Constantine took no public position on the issues. Speaking in Latin and translated into Greek, he called for peace and harmony in the church.

The Bishops debated the Arian controversy for two weeks. Arius himself was present, but, because he was only a priest and not a bishop, the rules did not permit him to address the group formally or to participate in the formal discussions.

At some point, probably early in the discussion, a supporter of Arius presented an ambiguous Creed that could be interpreted as saying that Jesus was a human being who became divine, or that Jesus was born divine.

The bishops who believed that Jesus was God added words and phrases to the creed that supported their views. They also added a passage to the creed that condemned certain of Arius's specific teachings. The hard-core Arius supporters opposed these changes, but they did not have the votes.

Constantine wanted the issue resolved. Two weeks into the gathering, he sent his officials to each bishop with copies of the document for them to sign. Everyone signed except two of Arius' most devoted supporters, two bishops from Libya. Constantine immediately sent them into exile along with Arius and several priests who supported him.

Today most people do not know this history of how Jesus became God. Most people believe that Jesus told people he was God, which is not true. They have no idea that three hundred years after Jesus died, a group of Bishops voted that Jesus was divine.

A few years ago in the middle of a popular novel appeared an imperfect account of how Jesus became God at the Council of Nicaea. Millions of people bought the book and read a description of a key meeting in the history of Christianity. Millions have seen the movie, which includes the discussion of the Council.

In reaction to the book, some Christians insist that no serious debate about the identity of Jesus ever occurred in 325. An article in the conservative *Christianity Today* says, "The first thing you notice when you read the early church fathers is that they are completely convinced that Jesus is God himself." The article then listed as the early church fathers only those persons who supported the view that Jesus was God, leaving out those who believed Jesus was a human being. Another article in the same magazine says, "Early Christians overwhelmingly worshiped Jesus Christ as their risen Savior and Lord." This

contradicts the evidence that many early Christians believed that Jesus was human. *The Christianity Today* article goes on to say that the "united testimony of the apostles . . . has always attested that Jesus Christ was and remains God himself. It didn't take an ancient council to make this true."

That, of course, is not true. The evidence of both the gospels and of our own experience and reason is that Jesus was a human being and not God. This was a widely held view for the first 325 years of the Christian Church.

I am delighted that *The Da Vinci Code* made people aware of the Council of Nicaea and stimulated more people to reexamine traditional claims about the identity of Jesus. With this novel, Dan Brown has reached more people than any university or seminary course on the Council of Nicaea could hope to do.

After losing the debate about the identity of Jesus, Arius died eleven years later in 336. Constantine died in 337. In 381, a new Council added the Holy Spirit to the Nicene Creed completing the Trinitarian formulation. Today this revised Nicene Creed is the only creed accepted as authoritative by the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and major Protestant churches.

The Bishops replaced the stories of a loving compassionate Jesus with a boring bureaucratic statement about the identity of Christ. They replaced simple phrases like "Blessed are the poor" with a confusing Creed that starts with these words:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made . . .

Nevertheless, throughout the history of the Christian church a few people have raised questions about the theology of the Nicene Creed. They believed that Jesus was important, but they did not believe that Jesus was God. In Transylvania in the year 1600, during the Reformation in Europe, these people started to call themselves Unitarians. Gradually the movement spread to England and then to the United States, and in the middle of the last century it made its way to Sarasota.

Today we are a mixture of Christians, Humanists, and others. Yet historically our theological roots go back to the sun-bleached Christian churches of the Mediterranean. They go back one thousand seven hundred years to a tall, thin priest who served a church in Egypt.

Recently I was talking to a young couple about their wedding service. She was Episcopalian and he was Jewish. They had come to a Unitarian Universalist church because they wanted a ceremony that would be inclusive of both of their traditions. She explained, "We want you to say a few words to introduce the wine cup ceremony from the Jewish tradition. Then we will open and pour the wine and set it on the table." Fine, I said. "Then we want you to read this blessing: "In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, bless, preserve and keep you."

"I can't do that," I said.

She looked surprised. "But I thought you said you were willing to mix our two traditions, Christian and Jewish!" She exclaimed. "You told me that Unitarian Universalist ministers were flexible that they were willing to let the couple write their own ceremony."

For a brief moment, in my mind's eye I could see Arius, standing tall and thin in front of Constantine the Great, facing exile and ridicule because he believed that Jesus was a great human being but not God.

"You see," I said, "What you are asking me to say is a statement of the Trinity. I am a Unitarian Universalist minister. Among the things the word Unitarian stands for is the belief that God is not divided into three elements. God is not the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This is what we mean when we say we are Unitarian; we come out of a historical tradition that speaks of the unity or oneness of God, not in the trinity. It is a tradition that suggests that Jesus was a great moral teacher, but not God."

"But," she said, "I am not asking you to change your beliefs. I don't even know if I believe in the Trinity. This is just a ritual. It would mean a lot to my family. I grew up with these words. They are old friends. I find them comforting."

"I am sorry," I said. "I know it may seem odd. However, long ago a few people risked their lives so that I would have the right to say that I do not believe in the Trinity. Some were tortured. A few were killed because of their beliefs. I feel a responsibility to that heritage. Therefore, I cannot speak the Trinitarian formula." She seemed to understand.

In my imagination, I could hear the voice of Arius speaking out across more than seventeen hundred years. "Thanks," the voice said. "Thanks for not forgetting me."

Closing Words

As we seek to honor our heritage and grow in knowledge, may we create here a circle of love that is ever expanding and ever growing.

Sources

In researching this sermon, I read:

When Jesus Became God, The Epic Fight over Christ's Divinity in the Last Days of Rome, by Richard E. Rubenstein, 1999.

Early Arianism: A View of Salvation by Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, 1981.