

Are Unitarian Universalists Christian?
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I have heard a number of jokes about Unitarian Universalists and Christianity. For example:

- When was the last time someone mentioned Jesus Christ in a Unitarian Universalist church? When the Custodian hit her thumb with a hammer.
- Instead of studying the New Testament, a Unitarian Universalist studies *Robert's Rules of Order*.
- The favorite Unitarian Universalist Christmas Carol is "What Child *Is This?*"
- And according to Unitarian Universalists, on Sunday Easter, if Jesus comes out of the cave and sees his shadow, we will have six more weeks of winter.
- And there is only one thing that all Unitarian Universalists agree on. Mary was not a virgin.

These jokes stem from the fact that the number of Unitarians who consider themselves Christian has steadily declined during this century.

- In a study completed in 1934, the researchers classified 68 percent of those Unitarians surveyed as traditional Christians.¹
- In 1967, 43 percent of Unitarian Universalists described themselves as Christians.²
- In a 1987 study 19 percent of Unitarian Universalists in the United States and Canada identified themselves as Christian.³
- Eleven years later in a study completed in 1998, 10 percent of American Unitarian Universalists called themselves Christian.⁴

Given that 90 percent of Unitarian Universalists in the United States and Canada no longer define themselves as Christians, I would say that most Unitarian Universalist churches are not Christian. Some exceptions exist. The National Universalist Church on Sixteenth Street in Washington D.C. retains a Christian identity. And certain members of some Unitarian Churches in New England, such as King's Chapel in Boston continue to see themselves a Christian.

Nevertheless, these congregations are in the minority. In most of our churches, ministers only occasionally use a reading from the Bible. Clergy seldom mention “Jesus” from the pulpit. We hardly ever speak the word “Christ,” in our worship services. Not only are most of us not Christians, many of us are uncomfortable with Christianity. Many of you came to Unitarian Universalism after a bad experience in a traditional Christian church. These experiences can make us uncomfortable and distrustful of people who describe themselves as Christians. As a result, for some of us, seeing the good in Judaism or Buddhism is easier than seeing the good in Christianity.

I have within me a complex and subtle web of distrust when it comes to Christianity. This is the result of the skepticism about Christianity I learned from the Unitarian Universalist church in which my parents raised me. Although I was taught to treat Christian churches with respect, I learned as a child, that we Unitarians were advanced people and that the other churches were backward. They believed things we Unitarians knew were not so.

As an adult, my view of Christianity was reinforced from encounters with organizations like the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition. Although both the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition have long ago faded in to history, I still fear that someday, if they can gain enough power, Conservative Christians will take away my freedom. I fear that freedom of choice about abortion will be lost. I fear that government will again condemn my gay and lesbian friends. I fear that Christians will force us to have our lives sustained long after we should be allowed to die with dignity. I fear that children will be forced to say Christian prayers in school. I distrust Christians.

A fine line exists between distrust and prejudice. When it came to Christianity, I moved from distrust to prejudice. As a teenager and as a young adult I did not open myself to new information, I did not open myself to new experience, I did not open myself to new patterns of thinking and feelings.

In my 20s, I first heard of a Unitarian Universalist minister who said he was a Christian I thought, something must be wrong with this man. How was it possible to be a rational, logical Unitarian Universalist and also be a Christian? Why would any clear headed person identify with a religious movement that is based on old irrational stories? How old-fashioned, I thought.

Knowing that something must be wrong with this man, at first I did not go to hear him preach. However, other students at the seminary I was attending keep telling me what a great preacher this man was. Finally, a friend dragged me to the Unitarian Universalist Christian’s church.

At the coffee hour I bought a reprint of an old sermon called “Confessions of a Unitarian Christian.”⁵ The minister had said:

I remember meeting with the Pulpit Committee of a large Unitarian Universalist congregation in the East. It was a very congenial meeting until one of the members asked me about my theology. When I replied that I was a Christian, the faces turned suddenly to stone and the room went dead. Finally, after the longest meditation I had ever endured, the chair said: "Well, maybe we won't have to tell anyone."

The Christian Unitarian Universalist went on:

I remember another incident when I spoke on the theme of the Christian symbolism in literature. I was asked to attend a sermon discussion after the service in the basement of the church. When I arrived, a man was screaming loudly, pounding on a table, and throwing ashtrays to the floor. As I approached, he shouted: "We have a free pulpit in this church, and we don't want any of that Christian garbage!"

As I read these stories, I thought that perhaps it was time for me to set aside my own distrust of Christianity, and see if there was something here from which I might learn. What are the beliefs of an American Unitarian Christian? A good answer was given in the 19th century by The Rev. James Freeman Clarke. He said,

A Christian is one who takes Jesus as his guide in religion, and who goes directly to his teachings for religious truth.⁶

I am indebted to Unitarian Universalist Christians for the way in which they reestablished my own trust in Christianity. Thanks to them, I began to see Christianity, less as an old fashioned, irrational religion, and more as a story about a person who tried to teach people to love each other. Unitarian Universalist Christians taught me that in spite of all the baggage loaded onto Jesus' life, in the original story there is still much that can inspire and guide me. As I matured in my own understanding of religion, I started to value certain passages in the New Testament.

For example, I have been drawn to the words in Matthew chapter 7 verse 3, where Jesus is quoted as saying: "why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?" In other words, I often remind myself to look at my own weaknesses, instead of focusing on the faults of others. "Why worry about a speck in your friend's eye when you have a log in your own?" I say to myself. A vivid, exaggerated humorous image to call to my attention the irony of faultfinding.

In John's gospel is a story that exterminates all conventional morality.

And early in the morning he came again into the temple, and all the people came

unto him; and he sat down, and taught them. 3And the scribes and Pharisees brought unto him a woman taken in adultery; and when they had set her in their midst, 4They say unto him, Master, this woman was taken in adultery, in the very act. 5Now Moses in the law commanded us, that such should be stoned: but what sayest thou? 6This they said, tempting him, that they might have to accuse him. But Jesus stooped down, and with his finger wrote on the ground, as though he heard them not. 7So when they continued asking him, he lifted up himself, and said unto them, He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her. 8And again he stooped down, and wrote on the ground. 9And they which heard it, being convicted by their own conscience, went out one by one, beginning at the eldest, even unto the last: and Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. 10When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? 11She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.

In this respect I can call myself a Christian. Like Jesus I oppose the death penalty and I support women's rights. However, when it comes to a story in Luke, Jesus raised the standard very high. He said,

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. 31And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. 33But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, 34And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. 36Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? 37And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise.

In other words to be a Christian it is necessary to help the homeless, heal the broken, to feed the hungry, and to visit the prisoner. In this respect I cannot call myself a Christian because I do not stop and care for the homeless persons I see on the streets of Sarasota. I struggle with my inability to follow this example.

Today less than 10 percent of American Unitarian Universalists called themselves Christian. Yet

they remain an important force in our liberal religious movement.

When I served as minister of the Unitarian Church in New Bedford, each Sunday I preached in front of a giant glass mosaic of Jesus being led by a Spirit into the wilderness. It was a very beautiful, very sacred space. In New England some Unitarian Universalist congregations still say the lord's prayer and serve communion.

When I was guest minister at the Unitarian Church in Adelaide, Australia, there was a group of about ten Unitarian Christians. (Out of a congregation of about 100) who met once a month to talk about different New Testament passages and how they impacted their lives.

When I was guest minister at the Unitarian Church in Edinburgh, Scotland, I would enter the church by walking under a sign that said, "There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." The key part of this passage from the New Testament are the words The Man Christ Jesus. The Unitarians in Edinburgh were trying to point out to the world that the New Testament says that Jesus is a man, not God.

When I gave the sermon last August at our Partner Church in Transylvania, I based my sermon on a New Testament passage about forgiveness. The thousands of Unitarians in Romania and Hungary consider themselves Unitarian Christians.

When I visited the Dublin Unitarian Church in early September, I was inspired by the beautiful stained glass images illustrating the New Testament.

My visits to these congregations greatly enrich my own religious life.

Today in America about 10 percent of the people in our congregation call themselves Christians. They would say that they take Jesus as their guide in religion. They look to Jesus' teachings for religious truth.

In general these Unitarian Universalist Christians are very modest. One of them said,

I do not pretend that I am a worthy example of the Christian faith. The abandonment of selfishness, the will to sacrifice, and the goodness of heart are daily struggles of the soul. I am never "complete," but always in the process of "becoming." I do not even declare myself a Christian to most people, because I know I do not deserve the title.

These modest Christians among us make me a better minister and a better human being. I give thanks for their presence in our religious community.

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1. Eliot, Frederick May, Chairman, *Unitarians Face a New Age*, the Report of the Commission of Appraisal to the American Unitarian Association, 1936, page 155.
 2. *Committee on Goals Report*, Commission of Appraisal to the Unitarian Universalist Association, 1967.
 3. *The Quality of Religious Life in Unitarian Universalist Congregations*, A survey by the Commission on Appraisal to the Unitarian Universalist Association, 1989, page 31.
 4. Fulfilling the Promise, *Unitarian Universalism Needs and Aspirations Survey*, 1998, page 7.
 5. Rankin, David, "Confessions of a Unitarian Christian," in *So Great a Cloud of Witnesses*, Strawberry Hill Press, San Francisco California, 1978, page 65.
 6. Clarke, James Freeman, *Vexed Questions in Theology: A Series of Essays*, 1886, page 12.