

UU Views of Jesus

Bruce Southworth

Following Jesus' death, something happened to the small group of women and men who had chosen to join him. A contagion of love—some transforming, creative event bound them together into a fellowship.

They told stories to heal their griefs and celebrate their newly found joy and sense of liberation in a world that oppressed and despised so many of them. One Roman Catholic New Testament scholar calls the stories “creative fictions” yet affirms their continuing power.

I find spiritual wisdom in Jesus' affirmation, even to the nobodies of the world, the marginalized and oppressed, “You are the light of the world.” Everyone, each one of us, is precious.

The broad tent of Unitarian Universalism is evident in this pamphlet. It reflects the widest possible view of the plurality that is welcome in our movement.

Read, learn, meditate, and may these offerings help you to grow your soul and act more boldly.

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The man called Jesus of Nazareth was the inheritor of the Hebrew prophetic tradition of bearing witness to justice, the primacy of ethical living in community, and the possibility of reformation for all. His life was an example of the supremacy of human agency, as well as the model of struggle for healing and recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of the poor and oppressed.

Universalists and Unitarians embraced this powerful example, insisting on God's universal grace, the innate goodness of humanity, and the freedom and ability of men and women to discern and live in right relationship with one another and the divine.

Today, while not our sole example for moral living, Jesus' message remains strong in our efforts to create a beloved community here on earth, impelling us to witness to the injustices of this time. Throughout the multiple transformations of our faith, Unitarian Universalism has remained firm in the belief that people dedicated to compassionate human relations can uplift the oppressed in our society, that we have in our own hands

the power to reform our world, and that communal exploration and accountability lead to principled living.

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While much energy has gone into finding “the historical Jesus,” I find myself drawn in a different direction. I am not so interested in knowing who Jesus was, but I am very interested in knowing who Christ is. The distinction may surprise some, but it is helpful. Searching for Jesus as he really was is a quest limited by historical distance and by the presuppositions of the searchers, as Schweitzer, among others, has pointed out.

Christ, as the incarnation of God's love in human flesh, is not just a figure of the past; he is a present reality. This living Christ is found in the Church, the community of those who speak his words, eat at his table, and become his hands, feet, and voice in a needy and often crucified world. Even those who are uncertain about God can recognize the presence of a Christ-like spirit in the people of a redemptive community. There are also those who, in recognizing his presence in our midst, know there is a gestalt of grace by which the whole is greater than the sum of the parts we contribute.

Actually, who Jesus was in history is an important question. It tells us that the story of Christ is not a myth but is rather grounded in real life. The more important affirmation is that because of the resurrection, Jesus is not confined to any time or place; he is free to be with us as the Living Christ everywhere, to the end of the ages.

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It has been a circuitous journey to Unitarian Universalism for this New York Jew, but for the past eighteen years I have found at The Community Church of New York a congenial religious community of support and inspiration. Reciting our affirmation on Sundays, I am comfortable stating that we recognize “in all prophets a harmony [and] in all scriptures a unity.” But when someone asks me point blank how I feel about Jesus, dark clouds fill my vision. I hear a dialogue in my imagination:

Q. Who can disagree with a message that has offered such consolation and inspired such sacrifice and commitment?

A. Who can support a message that has been used for such oppression?

The bottom line is that I cannot and will not separate the message or the person of Jesus from the history of oppressive acts undertaken in the name of Christianity. The institutionalization of Jesus' message has caused untold harm and prevented untold good, and it would be wrong, after two millennia, to forget.

One cannot recapture Jesus of Nazareth in any direct way; the road is too cluttered. In the words of Melville's inscrutable scrivener, Bartleby, "I would prefer not to."

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For most Christians, Jesus remains a mythic figure, a touchstone for spiritual focus or feeling. But the best of today's scholarship—which I identify with the work of the Jesus Seminar—reveals a man who is believable but problematic:

- His personal lifestyle fits with that of itinerant cynic sages from about 400 BCE to 600 CE: He had no job, no home, and no family, and he begged for his food. He wanted people to reject the world's values and realize what he called "the kingdom/sovereignty of God."
- He was best known as what we would today call a faith healer.
- His "Golden Rule"—turn the other cheek, repay injustice with forgiveness—was youthful idealism, not seasoned wisdom (ask anyone who works with battered women). Most today find it easier to defend Confucius' earlier advice: Reward goodness with kindness, but repay evil with justice.
- His ideal world (the "kingdom/sovereignty of God") was potentially here, within and among us. This would be a world in which we treat one another as brothers and sisters, children of God—period. End of sermon. End of religion.

The mythic Jesus remains appealing partly because the real one is, in spite of his flaws, both disturbing and challenging.

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The Roman authorities who executed Rabbi Yeshua bar-Yusef were not mistaken in regarding him as a dangerous subversive. Despite his radical commitment to nonviolence, Jesus represented an ongoing threat to the security of every established order. I believe he still does.

Jesus carried forward the Jewish prophetic tradition that finds the essence of religion in doing justice. For him, as for Amos and Isaiah, religious observance without social justice was a blasphemous mockery. Jesus repeatedly antagonized the powerful by reminding them that every society will be judged according to its treatment of the poor and defenseless.

Of course, no society then or since has lived up to the Hebrew prophets' ideal of justice. There are always compromises. But, if you once let Jesus' voice into your consciousness, you will never again be at ease with compromises.

Injustice results less often from malice than from willed inattention. In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite did no active harm to the wounded man on the highway. They just passed by on the opposite side of the road, distancing themselves from the uncomfortable sight. Relentlessly, Jesus keeps bringing the oppressed back into our field of vision.

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