

World Religions: Christianity

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We continue our exploration of the major religions of the world this morning by taking a look at Christianity. In some ways Christianity would seem to warrant a special place in our consciousness and in our religious exploration. First, by current estimates, there are over two billion Christians in the world, making it the single largest religion. Of course it is also by far the most widely practiced religion in our own country. And second, many of us as individuals, and Unitarian Universalism as a faith tradition, have emerged from the tradition of Christianity. Indeed some among us still count themselves as Christians, albeit with a Unitarian Universalist flavor.

But as important as it is for us to take an occasional look at the Christian piece of our religious heritage, it also presents some formidable challenges. First, as large as it is, and with the extremely wide variety of Christian subgroups, each with its own particular viewpoints, doctrines, and emphases, it's really difficult to distill Christianity down to its essence in any reasonable amount of time. And second, since many of us were raised as Christians, but have left the tradition for a variety of reasons, there is still a fair amount of emotional baggage and reactivity among us, making it difficult to be objective. Some of that may well be justified, but to the extent that each of our individual experience has touched only a very small slice of the Christian pie, I think it is worth taking some time and effort to try and get a glimpse of the bigger picture.

What I'd like to do this morning is, first, to give a little bit of that picture – by no means comprehensive, but with a little bit of historical context and some idea of the scope and variety of the tradition. And then I'd like to spend some time trying to pull out some of the essence of the religion, and how it might inform our own religious journey.

As I do that, I will confess right up front that I will not necessarily present a totally balanced, unbiased view. Within the wide range of Christian belief and practice, there are some very different attitudes and approaches. As in other religions that we have explored, some Christian groups and individuals maintain a very narrow and rigid perspective – a kind of exclusivism, or sense that there is only one right way, that can develop into hatred of other faith groups and their members. I see this perspective as a major cause of much of the world's unrest, wars, and even genocides.

But as I've said here before, that is not the only Christianity. There is Christianity that is based not in fear and exclusivism, but in love, hope, and inclusivism. And it is this kind of Christianity that I would like to focus on primarily today. The other I may have something to say about in a few weeks, when I talk about the challenges of interacting with religiously narrow people.

First, a little bit of history. As with many religions, Christianity began with a central, charismatic figure – in this case, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus lived two thousand years ago, and we know very little of his life story. We are told that he was the son of a Jewish carpenter. While the Gospels of the New Testament include stories of his birth and a bit of his boyhood, they are primarily a record of the last three years of his ministry as an itinerant preacher and teacher. And it is those teachings that were at least the seeds of what would become the religion of Christianity.

In the very earliest days of Christianity, it was primarily an oral tradition, with stories passed from person to person, and from community to community, not surprisingly with differences in emphasis and detail. The followers of Jesus understood the purpose of his mission in several sharply divergent ways, and they remembered and passed on his words and actions creatively, not passively. As a result, once the accounts of those words and actions were set down in print, they reflected not only the actual events portrayed, but also the character and spirit of the communities out of which those accounts emerged.

Most of us are familiar to some extent with the four Gospels that made it into the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Even they show considerable variation in emphasis and detail. For instance, Matthew is aimed at Jewish followers of Jesus, reinterpreting Jewish law within a new framework. Luke is aimed at non-Jewish Gentiles, opening the doors to a wider following for the new movement. John, the latest of the four Gospels shows considerably more theological thought and interpretation, providing the groundwork for later doctrines such as that of the Holy Trinity.

But those four Gospels are only a small sampling of the many that were produced during the first century or two after Jesus actually walked and talked. The others have either been lost entirely, or were pushed to the side as the chosen few were selected to become a part of the official canon of the New Testament. In order to have a complete picture of the early development of the Jesus traditions (traditions with an ‘s’), we must consider that larger number of lost and spurned texts, which take several different forms: miracle stories, parables and sayings, traditions about Jesus’ birth and childhood, and stories about his death and resurrection.

After this initial burst of creativity and variety, the Christian church may have enjoyed its closest approach to unity around the third and fourth century CE. The official scriptural canon was set, Constantine made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire, and many of the basic Christian doctrines were developed and adopted by a series of church councils.

But there was eventually a split between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. Then there was the Protestant Reformation which led to a number of Protestant variants of Christianity, a process of divergence that picked up steam leading eventually to the many thousands of denominations and sects that exist today.

For many contemporary Christians, especially Unitarian Universalists and other religious liberals, the essence of Christianity is to be found in the ethical teachings and example of Jesus, with special emphasis on love, compassion, and forgiveness, and on serving the poor and embracing the outsider. I’ll return to that in a little bit, but first I’d like to say a little bit about the more traditional Christian focus on the concept of vicarious atonement – the idea that Jesus died for our sins. This is captured quite well in an excerpt from an article called “The Essence of Christianity” by David McClister. He writes:

The center of Christianity is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Everything else in the New Testament, whether it be a command to love others, God’s demand that we keep ourselves pure from sin, the New Testament teaching about divorce, and every other topic all stems from the death and resurrection of Jesus. . . Take that away and Christianity has no foundation, no basis, no rationale, no center. . .

Christianity is possible only because Jesus died and was raised. Without His death there would be no forgiveness for our sins. His blood

paid the price for our sinning. And without His resurrection we would have no hope of eternal life.

So in this view, the whole religion of Christianity is grounded in what is understood to have been an historical event – the death and resurrection of Jesus. And we are at that time of year that that historical event is commemorated and celebrated. In fact, today is Palm Sunday. On Palm Sunday Christians celebrate the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, where crowds greeted him with waving palm branches, and covered his path with palm branches as well. Immediately following this great time of celebration in the ministry of Jesus, he begins his journey to the cross and his crucifixion in the coming week. For most Christian churches, Palm Sunday marks the beginning of Holy Week – the holiest time of the year - which concludes on Easter Sunday.

For many Christians, however, Christianity as a religious path transcends any mere historical happenings. Unitarian Christian preacher Theodore Parker, over a hundred fifty years ago preached about the “Transient and Permanent in Christianity.” For Parker, Christianity was not grounded in the divinity of Jesus or in the historical facts of Jesus’ life and death. Jesus was the messenger, but the truths of Christianity existed and were true independent of their messenger. Parker went so far as to assert that Christianity would be no less valid and true even had Jesus never lived. For Parker, as for many liberal Christians, the emphasis was on the religion *of* Jesus, not the religion *about* Jesus.

And even the more orthodox look beyond mere history. David McClister continues, saying that

Furthermore, the death and resurrection is not just a historical event. It is much more. It is the pattern by which we are to live. Being Christ-like [that is, being a Christian] means living a life that is characterized by death to sin and a new life for God.

Because I want to be as affirming and positive as I can about Christianity, I’d like to use the rest of my time to convey some of what can be pulled from the teachings of Jesus, as understood by what I consider the progressive and inclusive branch of the religion.

First I’d like to share a small part of the Phoenix Affirmations, a statement of the message proclaimed two years ago by a group of six Christian people who set out on Easter Day, 2006, to walk across America from Phoenix, Arizona to Washington, DC, as their way of witnessing to their faith. This document states, in part:

As people who are joyfully and unapologetically Christian, we pledge ourselves completely to the way of Love. We work to express our love, as Jesus teaches us, in three ways: by loving God, neighbor, and self.

Christian love of God includes: Walking fully in the path of Jesus, without denying the legitimacy of other paths that God may provide for humanity. . . .

Christian love of neighbor includes: Engaging people authentically, as Jesus did, treating all as creations made in God’s very image, regardless of

race, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental ability, nationality, or economic class. . .

Christian love of self includes: Claiming the sacredness of both our minds and our hearts, and recognizing that faith and science, doubt and belief serve the pursuit of truth.

That kind of Christianity I have no problem affirming.

Some other aspects of Jesus' teachings I draw from a recent informal poll conducted on a ministers' chat line in which I participate. One member of the chat had had a conversation with a fundamentalist Christian neighbor about what were the six most important things that Jesus taught. Based on this conversation, my colleague solicited responses from others on the chat. I pass on to you some of those responses.

- Radical compassion and expansive acceptance of others
 - The first shall be last, and the last shall be first
 - The meek shall inherit the earth
 - "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brethren, you have done it to me."
 - Love your enemy (which means pray with and for them and take away the power of both victimhood and violence)
 - God is God and not Caesar (one basis for the separation of church and state)
 - The use of righteous anger/public demonstration, as Jesus did when he turned over the tables of the money-changers in the temple.
 - Touching the untouchables and consorting with the socially unacceptable
 - God's love for the poor, the ill, the oppressed, and the perils of wealth and power.
 - Non-judgmentalism (as in "judge not that you not be judged," and "let he who is without sin cast the first stone.")
 - Reinterpretation of the Law to focus on its spirit rather than its letter. For me, this is one of the most important learnings from Jesus, for it seems to me that there is a whole new generation of scriptural literalists who somehow miss the spirit behind the words.
- Another teaching of Jesus is:
- The importance of loving your neighbor as yourself, and finally:
 - The power of story and parable to address risky questions.

One of the most powerful tools Jesus used in his preaching was the parable, or teaching story. As has been my practice in each of our services on the various religions, I would like to share one of those powerful stories from Christianity – indeed, from Jesus himself.

Jesus was talking with a lawyer about the importance of loving your neighbor as yourself. And the lawyer, as lawyers are wont to do, raised another question: "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan:

"A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn in Jericho and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise." [Luke 10:30-37]

The key to the story, of course, is that Samaritans were looked down on and despised as "the other," as outcasts from Jewish life and society. And yet it is the lowly Samaritan, and not the presumably pious priest or Levite, who acts out of compassion. So, in Jesus' world, compassion trumps piety. And to be a good neighbor means to bring compassion to the world, wherever it is needed. I would venture to guess that, if Jesus were telling this story today, in the twenty-first century, the Samaritan would have been a Muslim, or an undocumented immigrant, or a gay, lesbian or transgender person, all of whom Jesus would readily have embraced as his brothers and sisters.

Go and do likewise.