

Fourth Source: Jewish and Christian Teachings Which Call Us to Respond to God's Love by Loving Our Neighbors As Ourselves

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Michael Cluff

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Whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers.

And even if we did have only Christians in our midst, if we expelled every non-Christian from the United States of America, whose Christianity would we teach in the schools? Would we go with James Dobson's, or Al Sharpton's? Which passages of Scripture should guide our public policy? Should we go with Leviticus, which suggests slavery is ok and that eating shellfish is abomination? How about Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount - a passage that is so radical that it's doubtful that our own Defense Department would survive its application? So before we get carried away, let's read our bibles. Folks haven't been reading their bibles.

Jewish and Christian Teachings

I want to tell you a story that took place almost 20 years ago. My sister was getting married in West Virginia at an Evangelical church, so my family headed for the mountains to a beautiful, tucked-away mining town. The locals must have thought my family were from another planet; uptight, well-to-do Episcopalians, God's Frozen People. The world of George Herbert Walker Bush was visiting the world of Dubya Bush.

My girlfriend at the time and I were graduate students, and we might as well have had "Intellectual Elitists" branded on our foreheads. I was a freshly-converted evangelical atheist, and my girlfriend was a lapsed Catholic.

Nobody handled snakes or spoke in tongues. But there was tension in the air. At the wedding, I fought hard not to take offense at the minister's frequent references to my very-pregnant sister as a sinner. (Apparently my temples were bulging out to here.) And we felt awkward at the reception, where liquor and dancing were strictly verboten.

Once it was all over, my family congregated in the van. Cutting the tension, my grandmother turned to me. "When *you two* get married, it will be in the *Episcopal* church." My girlfriend and I grimaced: "Well, *if* we get married, it will be in the *Unitarian* church."

My grandmother gasped: "*That's* not a *church*!"

Are we a church?

Are we a church?

Maybe we aren't a church in my grandmother's sense of the word. We're much bigger than that; we draw from many sources. In my grandmother's church, the Holy Bible was the one source you needed. But in our living tradition, we draw meaning from an even wider range of sources: our own direct experience, the words and deeds of inspiring people, scientific and humanist thinking, world religions,

and earth-centered traditions. Oh, sure, in my grandmother's church, you could be inspired by science or appreciate other religions. But they all brought you right back to the celestial Head Honcho. And if any of those sources contradicted the Bible, well...

Though we aren't specifically a Christian church, as the list of UU sources says, we do draw from "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

The humane aspects of these religions are admittedly difficult to appreciate these days, since all too often they have symbolized intolerance and hatred. From the Mormon Church's role in California's Proposition Hate to settlements in Israel, it's easy to see examples of this. Indeed, I just found out that a spiritual hero of my youth, reverend Lorne Coyle, has become a leader in the effort to split the Episcopal church in Florida over the ordination of gay bishops. So as a former Christian, it would be easy for me to write off the faith of my youth as a starter-drug toward hate.

But has *their* intolerance led us too far in the other direction, toward *our own* intolerance of Jewish and Christian religions?

During his talk on scientific and humanist thinking a few weeks ago, Richard issued a challenge, suggesting that our congregation had become anti-Christian. Or perhaps a more appropriate term would be Jesu-phobic. For example, we've had Hindu speakers, Muslim speakers, Native American speakers and Buddhist speakers. Why haven't we brought in Christian ministers to talk? After all, many of us appear defensive at the *very mention* of Jesus. It's as if we feared that Fred Phelps and his "God Hates Fags" crew would suddenly come rappelling through the windows and convert all of our children.

When Richard made this point, my first response was to say, "Step outside! There's Christianity *everywhere*! Outside, we get Christianity *six days a week*, why bring it here on the seventh? It reminds me of the old story about kids complaining on Father's Day or Mother's Day -- when is Kid's Day? And the parents reply, "*Every day is kid's day!*" In the U.S., *every day* is Christian day!

But the more I thought about it, I realized Richard might have a point. Aren't there aspects of Judaism and Christianity that are worthwhile, say, to teach my daughter?

Before I go any further, I should be clear about something. While the sources refer to Jewish and Christian teachings, I confess that this will lean heavily toward Christianity. I apologize for that, but I simply do not have the background to do justice to Jewish teachings!

Christianity and UU History

So, let's not be afraid to discuss Christianity. Something that helped me appreciate the religion more was when I learned about how Unitarian Universalism evolved from early Christianity.

"Evolved" is such a good word to use. Even though UUism and Christianity are now very different animals, we share a common ancestor. In the early days of Christianity, believers differed wildly on fundamental issues of the faith.

Among these early variations were the ideas of Unitarianism and Universalism. Unitarians were Christians who believed that God was one entity, not three. Jesus, while maybe divine, was not one part with God. The Universalists believed that *all* humans are saved.

The Emperor Constantine, freshly converted to Christianity, wanted to put an end to the quibbling between factions and create a unified Christian church. So he commissioned the creation of the Nicene Creed, which proclaimed that Christians believed in a three-part God. None of Jesus' teachings were included in the creed, just doctrinal statements on the nature of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

Officially, anyone who didn't adhere to the beliefs stated within the Nicene Creed was a heretic. The first version of the creed explicitly stated that non-creedal beliefs are "condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic church." Pretty hard-core, huh?

Centuries later, our heretical forebears found a home in the American colonies, where intellectuals like Thomas Jefferson felt free to re-write the Bible, stripping it of its supernaturalism. Even the Unitarian church split off, as Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson left his Unitarian congregation rather than conduct a Christian communion, which he saw as "empty."

Today, the UU church is non-creedal, welcoming agnostics and atheists all the way to wiccans and Zoroastrians. The beliefs of all of the religions of the world – and the philosophies of those opposed to them – were folded into UUism. The only dogma was a *lack* of dogma.

Problems with the Bible

So, ever since the Nicene Creed, UUs have had a tense relationship with the Christian church. And good reason to have a problem with much of what's in the Bible. Sure, it does call on us to "love thy neighbor," but it often fails to provide a good example. Look at what Joshua did at Jericho:

Joshua said to the people: "Shout! For the Lord has given you the city.... So the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpets, they raised a great shout, and the wall fell down flat; so the people charged straight ahead into the city and captured it. *Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.*" (Joshua 6:16-19)

And why did God condemn the women, young, and old of Jericho? Because God had promised Joshua the land, that's why! Ethnic cleansing, anyone?

In general, the Old Testament god is a rough character. Here's a favorite story of mine:

[...] Elisha went up from there to Bethel; and while he was going up on the way, some small boys came out of the city and jeered at him, saying, "Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!" When he turned around and saw them, he cursed them in the name of the Lord. Then two she-bears came out of the woods and mauled forty-two of the boys. From there, he went on to Mount Carmel, and then returned to Samaria." (2 Kings 2:23-25)

So let that be a lesson to you, next time you call someone a "baldhead."

These are just a couple of handpicked examples. Personally, I have even bigger problems with much of the Bible. I find its approach to the problem of evil and suffering is insufficient. Nor can I believe its supernatural claims. So there's a lot in the Bible that's tough to reconcile. But how can we sort out the good stuff from the bad? Where is the baby in this bathwater?

Turns out some Christians are wondering about this, too. To illustrate, let's play a game of "spot the Christian Theologian." I'm going to read two quotes. Which one is from the atheist, and which is from the Christian?

Quote 1:

What was interesting and remarkable about Jesus was [...] that he rebelled against many aspects of Yahweh's vengeful nastiness. [...] He publicly advocated niceness and was one of the first to do so. To those steeped in the Sharia-like cruelties of Leviticus and Deuteronomy; to those brought up to fear the vindictive, Ayatollah-like God of Abraham and Isaac, a charismatic young preacher

who advocated generous forgiveness must have seemed radical to the point of subversion. No wonder they nailed him.

Quote 2:

"The death of theism is greatly to be desired.... Who needs a God who would require the death of the divine Son before being willing to forgive a fallen humanity? That is a portrait of a God as a divine child abuser. We should rejoice in the death of such a deity. A parent who would act toward his or her child in the way we suggest God has acted would be called immoral. I think it is high time we proclaim the theistic God to be immoral also." (John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, p. 237)

Any thoughts? The first quote is by Richard Dawkins from an essay called "An Atheist for Jesus." The last one, for all its strong language, was from Episcopalian theologian, John Shelby Spong. I'll finish his quote so you can hear his whole context:

"Moving beyond theism, separating our understanding of Jesus from our theistic understanding of God, is not only a moral imperative; it is also the only pathway into the future of a loving Christianity."

Cafeteria Christianity

Among many Christians, it's considered an insult to say that someone practices "Cafeteria Christianity," where you feel free to pick and choose what parts of the Bible you take seriously. But given what we've seen about the Bible, can anyone blame us for trying to pick out the good parts, and leaving the bad stuff behind?

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point to differentiate between the concept of Christianity and that of "Jesusianism." Let's think of "Christianity" as the doctrinal, "official" position on Jesus. Christianity celebrates Jesus as Christ the Savior. "Jesusianism," on the other hand, celebrates Jesus as a moral philosopher, the Jesus that Thomas Jefferson was trying to promote.

It's tempting to blame the Apostle Paul for the dogmatic aspects of Christianity, since he's widely considered to be the one who split off Christianity from Jesusianism. (I like to think of him as the Karl Rove of Christianity.) Indeed, he was the one who is most responsible for emphasizing Jesus as the Christ, the fulfiller of prophecy, the one who cleansed us of original sin.

Additionally, Paul frequently *overrode* one of Jesus' key teachings. Where Jesus taught about the importance of good deeds, Paul emphasized the role of faith. Thanks to Paul, too many Christians proclaim their faith, even as they ignore Jesus' teachings. As philosopher Walter Kaufmann said, "Paul substituted faith in Christ for the Christlike life."

Consider these words of Jesus:

And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. (Matthew 6 28-29)

And contrast those words with Paul:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12)

In other words, Jesus said, "relax and the Lord will provide." Paul said, "Get off your ass, you lazy bums, and make a living."

It gets a lot worse, but a discussion of whether Paul is worthy of praise or scorn is a topic for a whole other discussion.

Doctrine versus Jesusianism

In my very first talk to this congregation, I discussed how hiding behind church dogma can shield us from our own moral failings. By focusing on Paul's dogma in favor of Jesus' teachings, Christians risk losing the message of their savior.

I can give an example of this from my own family. A very religious relative once told me about an incident that happened during choir practice at his church. While they sang hymns about Jesus, a homeless man came into the church, looking confused. When a choir member asked the man what he wanted, he asked for food. My family member expressed horror at the man's nerve, and he told me – proudly and without irony – about how they chased the homeless man from their church. The audacity of looking for charity at a church!

The Good Stuff

Now, I don't want to pile on too much. Besides, I'm probably preaching to the de-converted.

So let's get to the good stuff in the Bible. There are, after all, aspects of Christianity and Judaism that are worthy of our respect and reverence. I'll choose two quotes, one from the Old Testament, one from the New:

Psalm 37:8-11

Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath.
Do not fret -- it leads only to evil.
For the wicked shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land.

Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there.
But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

Sound familiar?

Matthew 5:5

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Spong, Spong, Spong, Spong

Perhaps the most admirable approach to Christianity I've seen comes from the Christian Theologian I quoted earlier. John Shelby Spong, a former Episcopalian Bishop, ruffled feathers by claiming that the Bible must be interpreted in a *scholarly* way, and to understand that not all of it is literally factual. He believes, for example, that the virgin birth and resurrection are myths, not true events.

In his book, "Jesus for the Non-Religious," Spong argues, that the traditional theistic way of approaching Christianity is dying. God, he says, is not a conscious entity who takes offense at human actions and doles out punishments; that is an archaic belief. To resurrect Christianity -- literally -- one must focus on Jesus' example. He felt that Jesus' goal was for us to "have life, and live it abundantly."

He felt that the doctrine of original sin was false and harmful. He says, "Are we human beings ever helped by being told how hopeless, wretched, and evil we are? Does that ever make us whole? Does it ever make us more loving?" He continues, "Our way of understanding God and Jesus has played a major role in the creation of our religious anger. It has justified our prejudices, taught us to hate ourselves, abused us emotionally and told us of our need to be punished, perhaps through all eternity. In so doing, it has fed the violence that has been so regularly exhibited by Christian people throughout Christian history."

Needless to say, Spong is not a universally acclaimed Christian theologian, especially for people who are favor Paul's view of Christianity. But for UUs, this stuff is, well, I was going to say manna from heaven...

Spong's thesis is that Jesus provided three crucial moral examples. (I've added a fourth way at the end.)

1 Be Kind to Your Neighbors -- All of Them

Research on the evolution of morality, and of ethical thinking suggests that we humans are hard-wired to be good to people in our in-group: our families, friends, and community members. But to those in the out-group, those from other countries, religions, or fans of opposing baseball teams, we can be vicious and cruel.

Spong called these our "tribal impulses," and argued that Jesus urged us to transcend these impulses. He told us to expand our circle of kindness, to overcome our evolutionary upbringing and be good to others -- even if they are Red Sox fans.

2 Resist Prejudice and Stereotypes

Similar to being kind to all of our neighbors, Spong's Jesus challenges us to resist being prejudice and stereotyping of others. The story of the Good Samaritan is an example of both.

A lawyer asked Jesus:

"And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took

out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" He said, "the one who showed him mercy." Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:25-37)

Since we've all heard this story a hundred times, we're not seeing a subtle but important point. It helps to think of the Samaritan as having the same social standing as a Middle Eastern Muslim or an illegal immigrant does in the US. Back in the day Jews despised Samaritans so much, they would cross the street to avoid them. So not only is Jesus giving an example of loving thy neighbor, he's reminding us that even those we despise are capable of meeting Jesus' example.

3 Resist Dogmatism

Spong's Jesus also felt that overly rigid rules were worthless. From the Gospel of Mark:

One Sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath? And he said to them, "have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God... and ate the bread of the Presence, which is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions." Then he said to them "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." (Mark 2:23-28)

In other words, Jesus felt that laws had no value if they restricted human life and kept us from being fully human. And so, Jesus broke many Jewish laws by talking with menstruating women, healing the sick on the Sabbath, and defending adulterers.

4 Resist Evil by Maintaining Your Dignity

At the Sermon on the Mount, not only did Jesus bless the meek, he also said:

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (Matthew 5:11)

And

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you. Matthew 5:38-42

(This is the part Obama was talking about when he said that the Defense Department would not survive with this philosophy.)

These are not a call for passivity, however.

Note how Jesus refers to someone striking you on the *right* cheek. If I were to strike you on the right cheek, I would be back-handing you, striking you in the way someone back then would strike a slave. If you turned your other cheek, I would have to slap you in a way that a peer would slap another peer. By turning the other cheek, you are asserting your equality, even as you take the blow. Instead of cowering, you are asserting your dignity.

The same goes with giving your cloak: if you are poor and someone is suing you for your coat, if you give them your cloak as well, you will be naked. And according to ancient Jewish custom, by your nakedness you are *shaming* the one who is suing you.

Now, for those of us raised on Gandhi and King, I don't need to tell you what a powerful weapon Jesus gave the powerless.

In conclusion, I should say that this exercise hasn't made me convert back to Christianity. However, it has reemphasized what appealed to me when I was a Christian. And it's made me appreciate that despite the Dobsons and Robertsons of the world, there exists a vibrant Christian humanism. I'll let Spong have the last word:

[Jesus] saw humanity as a journey out from under control and rules toward wholeness. He called people to step beyond rules, defenses, tribal boundaries, prejudices, and even religion to embrace abundant life. This is a unique approach to life and to religion. That is why Jesus was so startlingly different, why he seemed to be of another human dimension and why his followers came to see God as part of his identity.