
No doctrine of words . . .

Practicing the religion of Jesus rather than the religion about him

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One of the most distinctive features of Unitarian Christianity is that it plainly asserts Jesus is best understood as being fully human and not God. Unitarian Christians understand the Divinity of Jesus not as being in his person but in his role or office. As I say this don't forget the witty quip of one of our ministers made at the end of the nineteenth century (and which I am fond of quoting because it is very important as well as funny) who, when accused of denying the Divinity of Christ, replied that he had never denied the divinity of anyone. For our tradition Jesus' connection with Divinity was to be found in his *human* ability to reveal God's presence to us; we understand and respond to this because he was human, just like us; we share, albeit in a less developed fashion, the same human connection with the Divine that he revealed; he is to us our brother not our God and so he can be for us the paradigm of how to be most fully human.

This stress upon the full humanity of Jesus and his role as a revealer of divinity along with our self-expressed desire to try and practice his religion rather than the religion about him has led some people to wonder why do not more closely resemble Judaism. Perhaps the most obvious argument for this is that we are very aware that Jesus' was a Jew and not a Christian – at least in the sense that word came to mean. So, the argument goes, shouldn't we be practicing some form of Judaism? Well, for all our deep respect of, and continued friendship with, Jews, the answer is “No!” and the reason for this reveals a basic issue that is very easy to miss.

We can begin to explore why this difference exists by starting with our reading from Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31³¹⁻³⁴). I have long loved this passage because it suggests to us that God's law is written on our hearts and that all people, from the least to the greatest, can know this law intimately and directly.

Over the centuries Christianity and Judaism have interpreted this passage in different ways but its basic message is straightforward enough. It suggests that it is not the *content* of the new covenant that will be different but only *how it is learnt*.

That, in Jesus' day, this was the question is clear. We know this because Jesus explicitly taught he did not "come to destroy the law, or the prophets . . . but to fulfill. (Mathew 5¹⁷). And, when you explore them closely, one of the most striking things about Jesus' teachings is not only how Jewish they are, but how closely they resembled the teachings of the Pharisees. Yet, as we are all aware, the gospels reveal that a conflict broke out between Jesus and the Pharisees which, eventually, over the course of nearly four centuries of debate – sometimes violent but by no means always, resulted in the development of a separate tradition known as Christianity. So what happened?

Well, as the Unitarian minister and Talmudic scholar, Robert Travers Herford, realised the disagreement centered on the fact that Jesus had a special "deep and overwhelming consciousness of God" which was, in him, "raised to such an intensity unknown in any other person." Consequently, Jesus' own religion was "the outcome of his own immediate consciousness of God, apart from all forms of thought, apart from all traditional authority" and that [Jesus] taught, not a "doctrine in words" capable of being passed from one person to another, but offered himself as a living and active example which allowed his followers to be "awakened to the knowledge of it [God], as they beheld him." Needless to say our own tradition has continued to centre on Jesus as the pre-eminent example of how to access God's law and this attitude was perhaps best summed up by the influential English liberal Jew and friend of Robert Travers Herford, Claude G. Montefiore (1858-1938) in his book *The Synoptic Gospels*:

The Christian, even the Unitarian Christian, has received the highest conceptions of God and righteousness through Jesus. To the Christian, alike in his teaching and in his personality and life, Jesus reveals God. To the Christian, even the Unitarian Christian, the N[ew] T[estament] is the book which tells him most truly and fully about the goodness and God, and within the N[ew] T[estament] it is the Gospels which tell him

best of all. He fits Jesus with his purest thoughts of God; Jesus brings God near to him. Whereas to the Jews, Jesus – or any man – would be in their way in their relations with, and in their approaches to, God, to the Christian, even to the Unitarian Christian, Jesus smoothes the way to God and shortens it. He is the way. Without Jesus – if that fatality could for a moment be conceived – God, even to the Unitarian Christian would be more distant and more dim; without Jesus, God to the Jew, would be no less near and no less bright.

But, for the Pharisees, Jesus approach was too much. In all honesty they believed that “whatever was felt to be true in religion was held in closest association with the *Torah*, and was indeed *Torah*, the divine Teaching,” and so the Pharisees simply had no possibility of accepting Jesus himself or his manner of teaching, even though his *basic teachings were the same as their own*. In an important passage delivered in his characteristically irenical manner, Travers Herford summed up the dilemma as follows:

The question of which of the two parties was right [. . .] is not worth asking, because each was right from his own point of view and on his own principles. But the principles on the two sides were fundamentally irreconcilable; and, while both parties took their stand on the doing of the will of God as the supreme duty, the one, viz. the Pharisees, maintained the Halachah as the defined way of doing the divine will, based on the Torah, which was God’s own revelation of his will, the other, viz. Jesus, maintained the individual conscience as the only guide to the right doing of the divine will. The opposition was irreconcilable because there was conscience on both sides, not on one only. The Halachah was worked out as an attempt to read the Torah by the light of the moral discernment of the teacher who defined it, from age to age. It never was, at any time, a mere cast-iron legislation. It always had its base in ethical discernment; and the difference between the Halachah and what might be called the free conscience is that the one is worked out in terms of an Idea, viz. Torah, and the other in terms of a Person, whether that Person were Jesus or any one of his followers. Therein, indeed, lies the deepest root of the fundamental difference between Judaism and Christianity; a difference which nothing can ever obliterate.

Herford concluded from this that, ultimately, Christianity should not be seen, “even in the person of its founder, a reversion to prophetic Judaism. It was a

movement in a wholly new direction, having no affinity with Judaism except at its point of origin” (Carpenter 1925, p. 168). Yet this statement requires an important caveat because Herford believed that this divisive breach, real though it was and remained, occurred only at the level of *interpretation* and that the *fundamentals of religion* which were being interpreted by Jesus and the Pharisees in their different ways remained absolutely unaltered. Herford thought that these fundamentals were: (1) that God is; (2) that humanity stands in some relation to God; (3) that intercourse of some kind is possible with God; and (4) that there is a desire to be in harmony with God. The nature of this breach also allowed Herford to state something which had, and still has, huge import in the field of Jewish-Christian relations – that the “Christian religion, though it began in a Jewish atmosphere and on Jewish soil, was *in no sense the successor or superseder of Judaism*. [. . .] *Christianity is in no true sense the development or completion or fulfilment or lineal successor of Judaism.*”

We can draw many lessons from this but today I want to stress that the religion of Jesus, at least as we have understood and developed it in Unitarian Christian circles from the sixteenth century to today, is neither Judaism nor precisely equivalent to the religion practiced by the majority of people within the Christian church. This is important to recall, especially on a day when we have our AGM, because in it we are reminded of our call to protect, nurture, support and encourage this unique, beautiful and liberal expression of faith which has played, and can still play, a vital part in the betterment of humanity. Into its service I invite us all to follow.

Amen.