

ADVENT, CHRISTMAS, AND HANUKKAH FOR UUS

Our Judeo-Christian Roots and the Messianic Expectation

A major underlying theme of Advent, Christmas, and Hanukkah is expectation, and the most important expectations for Christians and Jews are closely related. Hanukkah, as a holiday of lesser importance is not so much focused on the Messianic Expectation as it is on the endurance of the oil until more can be obtained after the cleaning and rededication of the temple, but at least symbolically the Expectation of the season can be connected. Advent and Christmas on the other hand have been wholly shaped by Christianity's Messianic Expectation, absorbed from the Jewish Messianic Expectation and applied to Jesus. And just as the Jesus story would not make sense without the context of Jewish Messianic Expectation, Unitarian Universalism would not make sense without reference to our roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

As an arguably post-Christian Religion, Unitarian Universalism does not find its highest truths within any single tradition, but draws wisdom from many philosophical and religious traditions, discovering the similarities in core beliefs of many. That said, our ministers are trained in Christian as well as UU Theological Schools and are generally more conversant with Christian beliefs and practices than of our other Living Tradition/Sources. Our members are also generally more conversant with Christian beliefs and practices than with other sources since so many have come from Christian backgrounds and a Christian-leaning society. Along the way, many converts to Unitarian Universalism have taken on an anti-Christian bias usually due to the excesses practiced within certain Christian communities. This is problematic to the extent that we more often betray our values and principles of tolerance, acceptance, inclusion, equality and justice toward Christians than toward any other group or tradition. Advent, Christmas, and Hanukkah hold the possibility of uniting practitioners in an experience of blessing, of blessed community, but each requires a certain letting go of a hard adherence to certain scientific facts and just a bit of willingness to believe in such things as angels, Santa Claus and flying reindeer.

Well, maybe not literally in Santa Claus, though even there one finds a bit of historical truth in the life of St. Nicklaus. Christmas celebrates incarnation or en-flesh-ment of the divine in the baby Jesus. UUs have found many ways to understand that both as a unique and a paradigmatic experience. Many of us believe that we are each born as the expression of and in the image of the highest and best of the world if not the universe. The birth of Jesus must express that truth in equivalent if not greater form. Even today, we often think and talk about the birth of a child holding all the potential of a life that may change the world.

The Jewish Messianic Expectation is problematic in a few ways as it was absorbed into Christianity. First, it is essentially a political and monarchical expectation of a King to be born into the line and likeness of David. Second, the Messiah was expected to unify the Jews and conquer the once Jewish territories. And even more challenging is the reality that the adult Jesus embraced some sense of expectation while essentially denying the political Messianic role. Jesus and his followers recast the messianic expectation into a spiritual and religious expectation of a coming and immanent kingdom led more directly by God without human monarchs. So the early Christians kept the Messianic language, emphasizing their understanding of Jesus as connected to Jewish Messianism through the addition of the title *Christos* or *Christ*, the Greek word for Messiah. By the way, the name Jesus as well as Joshua derive from *Yeshua* which means he who delivers, rescues or saves. Some have argued that Jesus is not a name at all, but rather another title, which then would leave us just a description of Jesus Christ as the Messiah who Saves, rescues, or delivers.

Many followers of Jesus over the centuries, and particularly in the modern age have sought to discover more of who Jesus really was through a *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, as Albert Schweitzer labeled it at the beginning of the 20th Century. The work of the Jesus Seminar has continued that quest for decades in an even more systematic fashion. Though the Jesus Seminar has made a compelling case for its findings, we remain far distant from the life of Jesus in time and context. The work of modern theologians over the last three centuries has elucidated the many levels of theological interpretation that were already being applied as the books of the New Testament, the non-canonical Gospels, letters, histories and other early Christian texts were written. We have nothing in the way of independent historical accounts about the life of Jesus.

The New Testament and a few other early Christian writings, each carrying the weight of their author's theological positions are all we have to understand Jesus and early Christianity. From these writings we know that Jesus was seen as a savior in the mode of the recast Jewish Messianic Expectation. Some of that expectation was gleaned from the Jewish Testament prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah. In the early days of Christianity it was seen as a Jewish cult, a reality that early Christian writers took some pains to cultivate through reference to Jewish writings. Presenting Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish Messianic Expectation was one of the more effective ways of engaging Jews in the movement.

Just as many in this country are denying the clear evidence of science around climate change, believing that such changes must stem from God's plan for the earth, so many Christians over the centuries have taken a version of the Jesus story as gospel truth. Most often it is the story of Jesus expressed in the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, even though Paul's letter were written up to 3 decades earlier and John is a smoother and more developed theological treatise. Many Christians even today have never been exposed to the non-canonical gospels, letters, histories and apocalypses that were not selected for the New Testament by the dominant Christian group in the latter half of 4th Century. Some of those non-canonical writings offering variant views of Jesus and the early church remain and have been studied by scholars while remaining somewhat less available to common folk. Christianity is built upon a selected group of writings expressing a tradition of belief which has stood almost two millennia. It is a belief system which comforts and supports its members but is not always open to the discoveries of science nor the changes of time and the world.

Unitarian Universalists, on the whole, are not particularly good at suspending cynicism and higher brain functions in order to better appreciate any beliefs in the unseen and unprovable. Still, Unitarian Universalists come to enjoy the Christmas Carols and the Candlelight Christmas Eve Services in higher proportion than for regular Sunday Services. UUs appreciate the story and mythos of Christmas even if they don't necessarily believe in the particulars. We can find ways to believe in the incarnation of blessing far more readily than we will in bodily resurrection and the Easter story. In the case of Christmas it seems that we are more accepting of the mythos even than we are willing to give mythic credence and grant even archetypal meanings to other parts of the Christian story!

At some level, though, the Christian story with its Jewish Messianic Expectation, is a major part of our roots as a religious tradition. We may not practice the 4 week season of preparation which is Advent, but in some way Christmas still holds a meaning for us. When I was a Methodist, from childhood right on through my years of Methodist Ministry, the carols and the Candlelight service were among my favorite parts of that tradition, and even as a UU I love singing the tunes and the candlelit darkness of Christmas Eve. Some of the words to the hymns are harder for me to believe, but the warmth and energy and sense of blessing remain vitally alive. The gift giving and getting is not as important to me now though I still enjoy seeing the faces of happy children opening their gifts! The chance to spend some quality time with family and beloved friends is the most important gift of all!

So what does Christmas really mean to Unitarian Universalists? Is it merely a beloved relic of an earlier time, something we dust off and enjoy once a year? Or is there some meaning to Christmas that transcends differences of belief, extends beyond the literal interpretations so often imposed on religious writings and practice within Christianity and other of our source traditions? Santa Claus may be fun for kids and a good metaphor for the tradition of blessing that always delivers more than coal, but how important is Santa Claus to the Christmas tradition? What about the birth story of Jesus, with various facets condensed into a story of humble yet miraculous birth set at the Winter Solstice in about the 4th Century? How does this story enhanced with angels, a star, shepherds, wise men, and animals in a stable help to ground the beliefs of Unitarian Universalists today?

For me, the core meaning is in the potential for each human life exemplified in the birth stories which even though added decades after Jesus' death help to connect transcendent beliefs in the divine with what is simplest and most humble in human experience. Whatever we may or may not believe about God or the Goddess, we can see the greatest potential of human reality in the birth of a child. In each child born there is the potential for great courage, great compassion, great truth and wisdom, there is the potential for blessings and salvation but also for destruction, hatred, fear, and rage. Every possibility that might ever come to pass is already there in the infant, the best and the worst. Only in the passing of time will it become clear what this child will bring to the world.

The birth of each child is a miracle and a blessing. That is certainly the Unitarian Universalist belief, finding its root in Jewish, Christian, and other beliefs. Whatever greatness might be expected of a certain child, the blessing is in the birth of each and every child—this is the expression and flowering of life. Because the life of Jesus was seen as extraordinary, the experiences around the birth of Jesus began to be remembered as also extraordinary and miraculous by the end of the first century, even though the timing of the birth was unknown and was officially set on the Solstice much later.

But of course, the Jesus story did not just celebrate the birth of a child as it grew to be the foundation for Christianity. Christianity as elaborated and extended by Paul, became first a Jewish sect and then its own religion which under Constantine became the religion of the empire. Even before the Council of Nicaea in 325, schools of theologians argued over the meaning of every facet of Christianity. Nicaea anointed an Orthodox Christianity which then outlawed many other branches including that of Bishop Arius which most closely resembled Unitarian beliefs. Later the Universalist beliefs of Origen were also condemned as heretical choices. Nicaea created a standard for beliefs which left many followers of Jesus no choice but to change or face persecution. The standard form of Christianity then went on with the Empire to conquer most of the western world.

Today as Christian fundamentalists battle Muslim fundamentalists for the right to declare God's truth, Unitarian Universalists seek to discover opportunities to bring progressive religious moderates together with a hopeful sense of blessing. We religious liberals will face many challenges in the year to come, but at least throughout the rest of this season we may continue to find blessings and to seek wisdom for the journey ahead. May we take the blessing of the holy child as a symbol of light and hope for this season!

Shalom, Salaam Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!