

## *Martyrdom, Selma, and some Unitarian and Universalist christianities*

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org

Rev. Paul Beckel

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### **WELCOME**

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn first experienced Christianity when the French came to Viet Nam, his home, and attempted to destroy Buddhism.

This initial encounter made it difficult for him to appreciate Christianity. But now, he says, he has images of *both* Jesus and the Buddha on his altar, and, “*every time I light incense, I touch both of them as my spiritual ancestors.*”

Thich Nhat Hanh notes that this awakening occurred within him because he eventually came to know Christians who embodied the true spirit of Christ.

Of course people have been fighting over definitions of “the true spirit of Christ,” for millennia. So don’t count on a definitive resolution within the next hour. Still, on this christian feast day, let’s consider how some Unitarians and Universalists have attempted to understand and embody this spirit.

And whether we be christian with a small c or a capital C, whether we be Buddhist, pagan, atheist, none of the above, or combinations of all of the above, may we be inspired to embody our own covenant: *Love is the spirit of this fellowship, and service gives it life. Celebrating our diversity, and joined by a quest for truth, we work for peace and honor all creation. This is our covenant.*

**GATHERING SONG**      *Morning has Come*      #1000

**CHILDREN’S CHOIR**      *Watu Wote*      Swahili, arr Albrecht/Althouse

**CHOIR**      *Thula Sizwe*      Zulu, arr Tate

### **MESSAGE**

Fifty years ago last month, thousands of blacks and whites marched fifty-four miles from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in an effort to wake up their society. An effort to bring humanity back from its hellish enslavement to the idea that African Americans are inherently less valuable than other Americans.

Or perhaps the enslavement was to fear—that allowing Blacks to vote would destroy democracy.

Since then, freedom has flourished in many ways. And yet, cycles

of forgetfulness and reawakening,  
fearfulness and reawakening,  
cruelty, terror, absurdity, and reawakening....

These cycles seem to be a part of our world, for now.

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In 1965, among the thousands of marchers in Selma were hundreds of Unitarian Universalist ministers and laypeople, including Rev. James Reeb.

Reeb was beaten there, and killed, and his death helped to focus America's attention. Reeb's death helped our nation to wake up for a while.

But does that mean his death was good, or necessary, or part of a plan?

Even though he went to Selma knowing about the likelihood of violence, Reeb would not have wished to be characterized as a martyr. He went simply as a christian who felt he had to *live* according to the words he had long espoused.

Reeb was raised by conservative christian parents, and connected deeply to the christian church as a youth—organizing, teaching, and leading worship. In the military during WWII, he formed associations with likeminded soldiers wherever he was stationed. With an ecumenical spirit, he wished to gather christians of every stripe into fellowship. Writing a friend at the time, he said, "I feel joy in my Christian experience. It tells me I am just touching on a fuller life in Christ." According to a biography,

In college "Jim would engage any student who would talk to him on any point in Scripture. One day he asked a group of them to weigh the familiar words from the Sermon on the Mount. He read: *Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him two. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not away.*

"What does this mean?" [Jim] demanded. "If I have two suits, do I give one away?" The others resorted to the explanations and interpretations of this passage that have been repeated down the centuries. But [Reeb], the thinker who sought to draw every argument out to its logical conclusion, was not satisfied.

"We cannot escape the meaning of those words by interpreting them," he insisted. "The problem is with us, not with what Christ said. If I were really dedicated, I would give away my extra suit. I don't because I'm not dedicated enough." [from *No Greater Love: The James Reeb Story*, by Duncan Howlett.]

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In my youth I too found myself earnestly involved in the life of the church and the ideals embodied by Jesus. Unlike Reeb, I was never led to believe that the words of the christian scriptures were meant to be taken literally. In fact, even as a child I appreciated Jesus' quirky plays on words, his evocative metaphors containing layers and layers of meaning, and especially the surprising counter-intuitive twists of his parables such as when he advocated for breaking the law and condemned the Pharisees for following the letter of the law exactly...while missing out on its spirit.

My path was kind of the reverse of Thich Nhat Hahn's. My first encounters with Christianity were positive, but later when I ran into Pharisee-like folks who claimed to own the entire tradition, I became skeptical. And frankly I'm *still* trying to figure out whether I should call myself a christian, or not.

Once in college I traveled with a Baptist preacher to a missionary conference. We enjoyed one another's company and shared stories of our visions for the kingdom of God. I told him about the classes I was taking in theology and science, and well, another class I was thinking of taking the next quarter. Something I thought might be helpful if I were to travel to other lands and work with people of different cultures. It was a class in world religions, and I was excited about it.

But my companion suddenly became very serious. He warned me that I ought not expose myself to such teachings, and he told me about the FBI. The FBI, he said, teaches its agents how to spot counterfeit money. And how do they do this? Do they have them study *actual* counterfeit money? *Oh no!* Instead these agents study the Real McCoy. They learn every shade and swirl. They learn to recognize the *true* thing so that when they see anything else they know it is false. So study the Lord, he said, and *only* the Lord. And you won't go astray.

It was conversations like this one that enlightened me to how narrow and suffocating religion could be.

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In 1774, another young preacher, John Murray, gathered the first Universalist congregation in America in Gloucester, Massachusetts. Murray's radical message was the gospel of *salvation for all people*.

This was quite a contrast to the dominant doctrine in colonial churches at the time, which held that Jesus' death had brought salvation to an elect group, predetermined by God. Only so many would be saved, and whether you were in, or out, had nothing to do with what you believed or how you acted. Human beings, it was understood, were nothing more than worthless sinners in the hands of an angry God.

Over time, this Calvinist theology mellowed to say that *all* people had the *potential* to be saved through Christ's sacrifice. But John Murray went way over the top saying that *all would*—in fact all *had already been* saved, through Christ.

Sixteen years later, there were about two dozen Universalist congregations in New England—enough to organize a convention (the General Assembly of their day). Of course a convention calls for some kind of organizing principle. But behind their universalism, the delegates to the convention were Baptists, Congregationalists, and followers of diverse theological schools.

So their Articles of Faith, as their first joint statement was called, would have to be very broad, and non-binding. Records of that convention include references to belief in the holy scriptures, a supreme being, Christ Jesus as the mediator between god and man, the Holy Ghost, and the importance of good works. The practical resolutions they passed included support for the abolition of slavery, which they saw as inconsistent with the principle of the ultimate worth of each person in the eyes of God.

After another 13 years, the Universalist convention had grown to 38 churches, and had seen a bit of theological controversy. So the statement of 1803 was shortened to eliminate reference to the Holy Ghost, and to Christ being a mediator between God and man.

In 1805 Universalism experienced its greatest theological jolt when Rev Hosea Ballou started preaching that universal salvation was *not* the result of Jesus' sacrificial death. Universal salvation was simply inevitable because of the nature of a loving Creator. It made no sense, Ballou said: what kind of infinitely powerful God would *have to* send his own son to die, by torture? And it also made no sense for *an infinitely loving God* to send people to eternal suffering in hell.

In that spirit the Universalists evangelized throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and they found tremendous growth both in their numbers and in their social reformation projects. By 1857, the Universalist Reform Association had projects involving Domestic Slave Trade; Service; Wages; Marriage; Women's Rights; Parental Relations; Rights to the Soil; War; Non-Resistance; Diplomacy; Commerce; Seamen; Foreign Slave Trade; Colonization; Indians; Foreign Relations; Conflict of Races; Temperance; Education; the Pulpit; the Sabbath; the Press; Politics and Laws; Amusements; the Poor; Dress; Food; Capital Punishment; Prison Discipline; Juvenile Offenders; Imprisonment for Debt; Dueling; Gambling; Courts; Trials; Idiots; Insane; Deaf and Dumb.... They were out to save everybody!

But along the way, theologically, some key terms of the Universalist Convention had changed. By 1933 all reference to the bible was gone. Jesus was no longer referred to as the Christ. Even universal salvation was only referred to obliquely by references to "God's eternal and all conquering Love," and "the supreme worth of every human personality." Gradually their concern with equality for all *in the afterlife* had been replaced by what became known as the *social* gospel.

In the 1940's, the Universalists applied for admission to the National Council of Churches. They wished to join forces with others to address the pressing human needs resulting from World War II. Twice they were turned down by the National Council of Churches on theological grounds. Two denominations in the Council offered to change their vote if the Universalists would state explicitly that they accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The others insisted that the Universalists were simply not sufficiently Christocentric; they were too much like Unitarians. So merger with the Unitarians finally came in 1961.

But who were these Unitarians? Weren't *they* Christians? The Unitarians were also a scattered group of liberal churches in colonial New England. What they held in common was a repugnance to the stifling orthodoxy of their day. Other than this they were a theologically diverse lot, independent as congregations, and wanting to stay that way.

"Unitarian" was not a name they chose; it was a term of ridicule used for them by their Trinitarian neighbors. Very few people called themselves Unitarian until 1819, when William Ellery Channing delivered his highly controversial sermon, "Unitarian Christianity."

In that sermon Channing professed his faith in the bible and the moral leadership of Jesus. However, he drew a sharp distinction between himself and his old school neighbors in that he

interpreted the bible utilizing the tools of modern scholarship. Channing also focused upon the *human*, rather than the divine, qualities of Jesus.

From that point the Unitarian progression beyond traditional christianity was more swift than that of the Universalists. By the 1840s, Rev. Ralph Waldo Emerson had begun to develop a transcendentalist philosophy in which any reverence for the *person* of christ was seen as abominable. The point of Jesus' life and ministry, according to Emerson, was to attract people to his *principles*, not to his person.

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In the 1950s, when James Reeb went to Princeton for his seminary training, he was confronted for the first time with a look at the bible through the eyes of history and science—instead of looking at history and science through the eyes of the bible.

Reeb began to recognize some of the internal contradictions of scripture, and his fundamentalist theology began to crack. In time he found himself resigning from the Presbyterian Church stating, “A church based upon a confession cannot...be devoted to seeking the truth. It must be devoted to upholding the ideas set forth in the creed. *These ideas [contained in the creed] may be true.* It is just that, to my mind, the confessional church does not provide a setting within which to test whether they are true or not.”

But still he recognized his purpose within the institutional church. He transferred into fellowship with the Unitarians, and found himself called to the streets. He worked as a chaplain, a youth organizer, and a community organizer in Washington DC. His attention was drawn in particular to the growing population of blacks moving from the deep south into the Washington ghettos.

Inspired by the work of Martin Luther King Jr., he responded to the call to Selma in 1965. After the first day's uneventful march, he had mixed feelings about whether to remain, or to return to his work and family. That night he telephoned his wife Marie to say that he would stay to march again.

On their way back to Brown Chapel, he and two friends were attacked by four white men with heavy sticks. Concerned that, as a rabble rouser, he wouldn't be treated at the local hospital, he was driven two hours to Birmingham.

The following morning in Selma all the marchers met again. Everyone knew Reeb was in critical condition.

An undercurrent of anger was growing in the group and the leaders were concerned. The urge to express their outrage and sorrow in some overt manner was almost uncontrollable. Andy Young of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference rose to remind them that nonviolence was the discipline of the civil rights movement.... “You can't push the philosophy of Jesus by using the methods of Caesar.” No provocation could justify their turning to violence. [Howlett]

Reeb died the following day. As a white northern minister, his death received a great deal of public attention. Memorial services were held in cities and towns all over the world by Christians

and Jews, blacks and whites, rich and poor. One official Catholic newspaper even proposed sainthood.

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As I consider the legacy of James Reeb I find that the truth of his convictions lay not in his death, but in his life.

I don't know if my life (so far) has embodied such conviction. But I still think of myself as a small-c christian because I identify Jesus as a model of moral inspiration.

At the same time, I'm ambivalent about taking on a label like this, because I do not want to promote the Easter message of those christianities proclaiming that suffering is glorious and necessary for the redemption of humankind.

I'd like to imagine that my christian convictions could serve as a bridge between myself and others who admire Jesus. But I also know that labels like this can create barriers.

So I remain in limbo—which is not such a terrible place. Just like heaven and hell, limbo is here and now.

So on this glorious spring morning I am not in despair with the state of humanity as a collection of worthless sinners. Nor do I lose myself in theological triumph and satisfaction that all is going according to plan.

I seek only, after the model of Jesus, to confront the powers that divide us, to surrender to my human limits, to cherish the ideal of an all-encompassing Love, and to be awakened each day to continue in the shared struggle for freedom.

**SHARING OUR GIFTS**

*Yemaya Asesu*

Cuban, arr Tate

**CHOIR**

*Wana Baraka*

Kenyan, arr Kirchner

**SENDING SONG**

*Lo, the Earth Awakes Again* #61

**BENEDICTION**

*Circle 'round for freedom, circle 'round for peace. For all of us imprisoned, circle for release. Circle for the planet, circle for each soul. For the children of our children, keep the circle whole.*