

The Trinity for Unitarians

1 – Overview and Method

Method

“You might say that Unitarianism has become dogmatic for us — the Trinity being something that a "good" UU simply cannot believe in because we are, by default, anti-Trinitarians. I'd suggest instead that UUs celebrate theological liberalism as a method rather than as a set of theological conclusions.” – Chris Walton, Editor UU World (in his blog “Philocrities”).

“Christian Faith is the response to Jesus” not “getting back to the religion of Jesus.” The Trinity is part of that response as Jesus communities answer the question “How is God with us?” “When God is too close or too removed, humans take his place.”

Biblical Studies – historical critical method and the use of reason become the hallmark of anti-trinitarian theological method, yet many if not most of the Unitarian, Universalist and other “heretics” we encounter will use an “uncritical” approach to scripture in their justification for theological positions, even using “proof-texting” or citing scripture texts uncritically to support their views, well into the 19th century.

“Some of us UUs these days are just finding the Trinity a helpful metaphor and a window to God, however smudged.” – Rev. Tony Lorenzen

Heresy/Hertics

Heresy comes from a greek work meaning “to choose.” A heretic is someone who has not given up the right to choose what to think or what to believe. Heresy is measured in juxtaposition to orthodoxy or “right” thinking.

Arianism - from Arius (256-336) north African priest (leader). Believed Christ was of a different essence/nature (ousia) than God. Denied the doctrine of homousias, that Christ is of one being with “the Father” eternally begotten of the father.” Christ is a lesser created being. Jesus is “more than human,” but not one with God from the beginning. This is William Ellery Channing’s Christ. This does not deal as well with a theology of the holy spirit, but we’ll get that in week four.

Adoptionism – *Not* the same thing as Arianism. Jesus is born of human parents (Joseph and Mary) and adopted by God as son at his baptism. This is argued by some scholars as being the view of the author of the Gospel of Mark's view and Saint Paul's view. Also seen as the view of many early Jesus communities by some. This is the view of the non-canonical Gospel of Hebrews, Gospel of Ebionites and Gospel of Nazoreans.

Socinianism – named after Laelius Socinus (dies 1562) and his nephew Faustus Socinus

(died 1604) Socinians presage the Transcendentalists. Their teaching led to the Rakovian Catechism in Poland (1605). They insist on interpreting scripture with the use of reason. They deny the doctrine of justification and atonement of the cross and reject the idea of hell and see sacraments as only symbols. God can not be completely omniscient and there can not be a pre-existence Logos (or Christ), therefore Jesus is human, although as a divinely appointed mediator (savior), he can be worshipped. The holy spirit is a power of God, not another entity. Socinians refused to bear arms or hold public office.

Resources

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8. Gulley, Phillip. *If Grace is True*. Harper Collins, New York, 2003.
9. The Church Fathers - <http://www.ccel.org/fathers.html> - an online free library of all the early Christian Church writings.
10. <http://www.spirithome.com/histtrin.html>

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2 - GOD

Unitarianism - God is One

The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) The Jewish “profession of faith”

Sh'ma Yis'ra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad. - Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

Excerpts from Samuel Barrett, 1825 – Scriptural Arguments for Unitarianism:

1. 1. Because Jesus Christ is represented by the sacred writers to be as distinct a being from God the Father as one man is distinct from another.
2. 94. Because there are in the New Testament seventeen passages, wherein the Father is styled one or only God, while there is not a single passage in which the Son is so styled.
3. 95. Because there are 320 passages in which the Father is absolutely, and by way of eminence, called God; while there is not one in which the Son is thus called.
4. 96. Because there are 105 passages in which the Father is denominated God, with peculiarly high titles and epithets, whereas the Son is not once denominated.
5. 97. Because there are 90 passages wherein it is declared that all prayers and praises ought to be offered to Him, and that everything ought to be ultimately directed to his honor and glory; while of the Son no such declaration is ever made.
6. 98. Because of 1,300 passages in the New Testament wherein the word God is mentioned, not one necessarily implies the existence of more than one person in the Godhead, or that this one is any other than the Father.
7. 100. Because, in a word, the supremacy of the Father, and the inferiority of the Son, is the simple, unembarrassed, and current doctrine of the Bible; whereas, that of their equality or identity is clothed in mystery, encumbered with difficulties, and dependent, at the best, upon few passages for support.

Michael Servetus (1511-1553) – Burned at the stake by John Calvin in Geneva in 1553 for heresy for his book *On the Errors of the Trinity* (1531). – Servetus is an Arian. His chief argument is with the ousias of the Nicene creed: “And so I admit one person of the Father, another Person of the Son, another Person of the Holy Spirit, three Persons in one Godhead and this is the true Trinity. But I should prefer not to use a word foreign to the scriptures, lest perchance in future the philosophers have occasion to go astray. And I have no controversy with the earlier writers because they employed this word sensibly.” Servetus doesn’t like the Greek ousias, implying God, Jesus and Holy Spirit share one BEING or ESSENCE. This concept is not found in the New Testament.

Francis David (1510-1579) – Transylvanian champion of Unitarianism. Studied for Catholic priesthood then converted to Lutheranism and Calvinism, before becoming Unitarian in theology. Was theologian to King John Sigismund and instrumental in the Diet of Torda (1568), establishing Unitarianism. “Outside of God there is no other God, neither three, neither four, neither in substance, neither in persons, because the scripture nowhere teaches anything about a triple God.” However, for David, God gives Jesus divinity and Jesus as Christ is begotten by the holy spirit.

Universalism – All are Saved

Universalism is deeply and intimately tied to the idea of trinity, for there used to be a time (and for some it is still true) that if you didn't believe in the Trinity the "right" way, God (all three parts of it) would damn you to hell forever. Universalism counters this with a God that seeks to save or love everyone and/or does away with the idea of hell. Thus the *idea* you have of the trinity isn't as important as the *experience* you have of God.

"We assert that the Word, who is the Wisdom of God, shall bring together all intelligent creatures, and convert them to his own perfection, through the instrumentality of their free will and of their own exertions." – Origen 185-254

"In the liberation of all, no one remains a captive." Didymus, 309-395

"In the present life, God is in all, for his nature is without limits, but is not all in all. But in the coming life, when mortality is at an end and immortality granted, and sin no longer has any place, God will be all in all." Theodoret the Blessed, 387-458

"Since love in him was perfect and since love hates or envies no one, but includes everyone, even though we were all his enemies, surely he would not wish to exclude anyone." Hans Denk, 1495-1527

"Every man has a measure of true and saving grace" – Robert Barclay, 1648-1690

"Give them not hell, but hope and courage. Preach kindness and the everlasting love of God" – John Murray, 1741-1813

"As to the justice of endless punishment, minds enjoying the liberty of free inquiry could easily detect the diabolical character of such justice as it is the exact opposite of the Divine nature, which is love. Such justice is evidently predicated on the false principle and ungodly practise of rendering evil for evil." – Hosea Ballou 1771-1852

"Only when we see that we are part of the totality of the planet, not a superior part with special privileges, can we work effectively to bring about an earth restored to wholeness." – Elizabeth Watson

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3 - JESUS

Jesus - Christology – “Who do UU Say that I am?”

Mark 8:27-30

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that I am?’ And they answered him, ‘John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.’ He asked them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Messiah.’ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Nowhere does Jesus claim that he IS God.

Stepping Stones to a Human Jesus and today’s liberal or progressive Christianity:

Calvinism: John Calvin (1509-1564) French Protestant writes Institutes of the Christian Religion (1536). Calvin’s theology is summarized by TULIP – interestingly, a TULIP is a response to the Arminian (see below) challenge. T-total depravity. U-unconditional election, L- limited atonement, I-irresistible grace, P-perseverance of the saints.

Arminianism: Dutch theologian Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) - God calls all people to Himself through Christ, whether or not this call is effectual depends upon the individual’s libertarian free will. Still accepts the doctrine of the atonement, but its Christ on the cross was universal (for everyone) and each person is the decider of salvation based on their free will acceptance of grace and salvation. Channing is an Arminian (and then also a Unitarian). “The Arminians condemned equally the orthodox insistence on creeds and confessions of faith of human origin and the deistic confidence in natural reason unassisted by divine revelation.” – Wintersteen pg. 6

Unitarianism:

The Orthodox Unitarians: William Ellery Channing (April 7, 1780 – October 2, 1842), Andrews Norton (December 31, 1786-September 18, 1853), Henry Ware, Jr. (April 21, 1794 - September 22, 1843). They are all basically Arians.

“We believe firmly in the divinity of Christ’s mission and office and that he spoke with divine authority...we believe God dwelt in him, manifested himself through him, taught men by him and communicated his spirit...In Christ’s words we hear God speaking, in his miracles we see God acting, and in his character and life we see an unsullied image of God’s purity and love....” HERE IS THE SPLIT WITH ORTHODOXY-->...*“We say that the son can not be the same being as his own Father; that he, who was sent into the world to save it, cannot be the living God who sent him.”*

- William Ellery Channing, “Objections to Unitarian Christianity Considered,” 1819

The Transcendentalists: Ralph Waldo Emerson (May 25, 1803 – April 27, 1882), Theodore Parker (August 24, 1810-May 10, 1860).

“It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority.” - Theodore Parker, *The Transient and the Permanent in Christianity*, 1841

The Moderns: Clayton Raymond Bowen, William Wallace Fenn, Charles E. Park.

“The resurrection stories in our Gospels are one and all legendary. The earliest faith in his resurrection, which is amply attested for us is in the Letters of Paul, conceived his spirit or personality to have escaped from the underworld of the dead on the third day (which soon came to be taken quite literally) and to have risen into the heavenly life with God. This did not involve any reanimation of the dead body and had no concern whatever with the grave.” - Clayton Raymond Bowen

The Progressive Christians: Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong, the Jesus Seminar, *The Search for the Historical Jesus and Progressive Christianity* - “What Manner of Man is This?”

“I began to see Jesus as one whose spirituality-his experiential awareness of Spirit – was foundational for his life. This perception became the vantage point for what I have since come to understand as the key truth about Jesus: that in addition to being deeply involved in the social world of the everyday, he was also grounded in the world of the Spirit.” Marcus Borg – *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* pg 15

Borg sees Jesus as what he calls a “Spirit Person,” one who explicates human spirituality.

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4 - SPIRIT

SPIRIT - Pneuma πνεύμα (Greek) - Ruah רוח (Hebrew)

John the Baptist - Another one is coming who “will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” Matt 3:10-12 and Luke 3:9-17

The paraclete παράκλητος (counselor) – Gospel of John (14:16, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7) identified with the Holy Spirit of Acts of the Apostles

Montanism - Montanus (135 ?- 177? C.E.) – Preached what he claimed were a series of direct revelations of the Holy Spirit.

Tertullian (160 – 220 C.E.) – First major Latin Christian apologist. First to use the term “Trinity”. Very “orthodox” but also became a Montanist.

Great Awakening- Name given to a series of evangelical revivals in colonial and post colonial America characterized by Calvinistic “Sinners in the Hands of Angry God” preaching, emotionalism, and a reliance on being saved by the spirit. First Great Awakening 1725 -1750. Second 1800-1840. Third 188-1910. Fourth 1960-1980?

Pentecostalism – American Protestant Christian movement characterized by a direct personal experience of God by baptism in the Holy Spirit. Features speaking in tongues, singing and exhortation, and emotional preaching. It’s beginnings are traced to Topeka, Kansas; Houston, TX and Los Angeles, CA at the beginning of the 20th century.

UUs have been traditionally leery of the Spirit-infused religion or branches of Christianity as Unitarianism especially has it’s roots in the enlightenment and champions the intellect and reason.

However as Unitarian Universalism swings in practice from the Humanism that dominated the 20th century to a more balanced religious focus, embracing both a language and practice of reverence, not only spirituality, but Spirit and Holy Spirit are finding a place at the table in UU Congregations once again.

Unitarian Universalism began embracing the spirit in eastern religions, spiritual practices such as labyrinths and meditation, but not so much the Holy Spirit. Now more and more UU’s are discovering spiritual direction, more emotional forms of community worship and even languages and practices of reverence that are spirit if not Holy Spirit centered.

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12. Ahlstrom, Sydney E. A Religious History of the American People (1972) the standard history