

WHAT'S THE UNITARIAN-UNIVERSALIST PROBLEM WITH JESUS?

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<http://eftaylor.com/thoughts/>

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DEFINITIONS

Eschatology is a part of theology, philosophy, and futurology concerned with what are believed to be the final events of history, the ultimate destiny of humanity—commonly referred to as the "end of the world" or "end time". Adjective: eschatological.

Yeshu is the Jewish name for Jesus. (Jesu, as in Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*.) Sometimes written as *Yeshua*. Accent on *Yesh*.

Irony: Saying one thing and meaning something else, often the opposite. Sometimes a striking contrast, the opposite of what one might expect.
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INITIAL READING

Though even most Christian scholars finally regard Jesus as Jewish, and clearly he was Jewish, he is now American: he is multi-everything. We may as well have a Southern Baptist or Pentecostalist or Mormon or Muslim or African or Asian Jesus as a Jewish one. His paradoxes have always been universal, but his personalism is nineteenth-century American, from the Cane Ridge Revival of 1801 all the way to the circus-like Revivalism of Charles Grandison Finney, precursor of Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. [Finney was an early President of Oberlin College, where I grew up.] Eighty-nine percent of Americans regularly inform the Gallup pollsters that Jesus loves each of them on a personal and individual basis. That moves me perpetually to awe and to no irony whatsoever. . . .

If there is a single principle that characterizes Jesus, it is unswerving trust in the Covenant with Yahweh. That is the essence of the Jewish religion ... No Jew known at all to history can be regarded as more loyal to the Covenant than was Jesus of Nazareth. That makes it an irony-of-ironies that his followers employed him to replace the Yahweh Covenant with their New Covenant [that is, with what we call the New Testament].

---Harold Bloom in *Jesus and Yahweh, The Names Divine*, 2005, Riverhead Books

READING CONVERTED TO A RESPONSIVE READING FOR THE SERVICE

There is silence all around. The Baptist appears, and cries: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Soon after that comes Jesus, and in the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurable great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.

----Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*

SERMON

This talk is about our personal and institutional avoidance of Jesus at this UU Church in Belmont. The United States Internal Revenue Service classifies us as a Christian church. But in regular worship services during the church year we almost never mention Jesus. Where does this avoidance come from? What is there about Jesus that leads to our avoidance? What is its consequence for our church life? What would it take for us to start talking about Jesus among ourselves?

A few years ago, when Edmund Robinson was our minister, someone in our congregation said to me --- in my memory this is a direct quote --- "Edmund mentioned Jesus in his sermon two weeks in a row. It's time to stay away from this church for a few months."

At a Christmas service, our current minister David Bryce said that for a few days every year he completely abandons his regular unbelief and participates fully in the miracle stories surrounding Jesus' birth. During the rest of the year we hear almost nothing about Jesus, no matter who is preaching. This is strange: David Bryce often says that, as a Humanist, he uses *every* sacred text as a resource. Surely the four Gospels in our New Testament are sacred texts. Why does David use them only at Christmas?

Here is a preview of my conclusion later in this talk: David Bryce is right. In our regular services together we can deal only with the infant Jesus. The adult Jesus is our third rail; touch it as an entire congregation and we die! In my opinion, David Bryce's avoidance of the adult Jesus is the right policy for our church as a whole. But a few of us can carry on a robust conversation about Jesus elsewhere than in the regular service, if we want to.

Someone in this audience is sure to say, "Come on! It's obvious why we avoid Jesus in our church. Almost every member of our congregation is a refugee from Jesus." I, Edwin Taylor, am a refugee from a Puritan family with rigid rules of behavior, albeit humanely applied. Someone else in this room is a refugee from a fundamentalist family; this person in the audience may have grown up asking Jesus' personal advice about every daily task. A third person here is a refugee from a Roman Catholic background. A fourth, from a Jewish family, would be justified in hating Jesus, because he is the excuse for the slaughter of millions of Jews. A fifth person, from a family who attends no church, may think of the presence of Jesus

in our public life in the United States as a kind of disease.

It's even worse than that. There is no limit to the trivial projects that promote themselves by calling on Jesus' name. Richard Marius writes,

I have found myself disappointed in Jesus for being used for just about any sideshow that comes down the track. . . . There have been many, many times when I have felt that perhaps the worst thing that has ever happened to East Tennessee [where Richard Marius grew up], and perhaps to the country at large, has been Jesus because Jesus has allowed people to have a benign mask to hide wickedness behind . . .

--- *Wrestling with God, The Meditations of Richard Marius*, pages 20-21

To mention the grown-up Jesus in one of our regular worship services is to stir up these varied memories and emotions. Everyone in this room has escaped to this present Nirvana of Unitarian Universalism --- he said ironically --- why look back and be upset all over again?

Case closed. Can we now go home? Fat chance! This congregation talks so rarely about Jesus that we can all use some common background about him. Brace yourselves to receive that background about Jesus now.

When I was young, I was very pious and read the Bible religiously. In preparation for this summer service I re-read the three Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke --- and tried to get through the fourth gospel, that dream called The Revelation to John. It was strange to come back to this scripture as an adult, after a lifetime. I want to tell you my four strongest impressions from this re-reading of the Gospels:

FIRST strong impression: Jesus is a stranger. Both the Bible itself and two thousand years of scholarship tell us that Jesus did not think the way we think, he did not look at the world the way we look at the world, he did not understand people the way we understand people, and he did not have our expectations about what happens next in history. I do not say that our vision is better than Jesus' vision, only that the two are almost totally different. In my opinion, Jesus is a stranger.

SECOND strong impression from re-reading the gospels: Jesus is a master teacher. I am a physics textbook writer and know a great teacher when I see one. The gospels are in large part collections of the sayings and the stories of a master teacher. Here are two sayings: "Take no thought for tomorrow." "Turn the other cheek." These sayings are surprising; they go against common sense. So do Jesus' stories, which we call parables. Here is a reminder of one parable: God is like a father who welcomes home his prodigal son, even though that son has squandered his inheritance in wild living. Scholars think that Jesus used each of his sayings and stories over and over again as he traveled around. Most of Jesus' hearers could not read, and in those days there were no public newspapers. The traveling preacher spread his sayings and stories by repetition, with variation of each story according to the circumstance. Jesus is a master teacher.

THIRD strong impression from re-reading the gospels: Jesus' central message is that the end of the world is at hand; it will come at any minute, by surprise. The study of the end of the world is called *eschatology*, and the four gospels in our Bible are deeply eschatological. *More:* Jesus spoke of himself as the *Son of Man*, these are code words that give him a leading role in God's imminent coming with power. More than once, according to the gospels, Jesus assured his hearers that people then alive would witness the coming of the Almighty.

FOURTH strong impression from re-reading the gospels: Jesus sets before us an impossible set of morals and ethics that demand truly pure attitudes and actions. To me this clearly arises from Jesus' belief that the world will come to an end soon. You and I can behave *very* well for a month or two, as if in training for the Moral Olympics. Maybe we can behave *pretty* well a little longer if we expect the Almighty to pierce us with His gaze and look directly into our soul. But to be pure and good over a long lifetime? For me that is impossible!

How do we respond to these weird and disturbing impressions of the four gospels in our Bible? People make sense of strange things by telling stories. Here are three stories that try to make sense of Jesus' life and teachings.

FIRST STORY: Jesus as Yeshu, the traveling Jewish preacher. Yeshu is the Jewish name for Jesus. According to this first story, Yeshu is an itinerant Jewish preacher. Yeshu is absolutely loyal to the Jewish Covenant with God, but also preaches that God is merciful and forgiving. Yeshu tells us how to live to be part of God's kingdom, but says nothing about a sudden end of the world, nor does he expect it. The teachings of Yeshu, the traveling preacher, are NOT eschatological.

Here is a modern book *The Gospel of Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar*. This is a version of the gospels assembled recently by a hundred or so New Testament scholars who call themselves The Jesus Seminar. They studied not just the four gospels in the Bible but all twenty-two versions of the gospels and gospel fragments written before the year 350. They then took a complicated vote about their individual professional conclusions concerning which of the gospel sayings and stories Jesus actually said, and which events of his life actually happened. Robert W. Funk combined the result into a single account, *The Gospel of Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar*. Essentially it is the story of Yeshu, the traveling Jewish preacher. One beauty of their translation is that it is phrased in modern English. Here is a sample about John the Baptist:

John would say to the crowds that came out to get baptized by him, "You slimy bastards! Who warned you to flee from the impending doom? Well then, start producing fruits suitable for a change of heart, and don't even start saying to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father.' Let me tell you, God can raise up children for Abraham right out of these rocks."

SECOND STORY: Jesus the Failed Messiah.

This second story is highly eschatological: Jesus believes that the end of the world will come soon and that he will have a big part in it as the Son of Man. But this does not happen. Just before he dies on the cross, Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

Jesus dies with the terrible realization that his purpose to bring in God's kingdom has failed, as dramatically recounted by Albert Schweitzer in our responsive reading.

You think the play *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles is a great tragedy? How about the play *Jesus the Failed Messiah*, one of the smartest men in history who realizes just before he dies that his whole vision of the end of the world is wrong?

THIRD STORY: Jesus the Triumphant Messiah. The third story is also eschatological, but this time Jesus is right. He voluntarily dies for our sins, loves each of us personally from his throne in heaven, and will return in power at an unknown time in an apocalyptic event called the Second Coming of Jesus. Almost 80 percent of Christians in the US believe in the Second Coming. At the Second Coming, the elect --- those chosen to see God --- rise to meet Jesus in the air, in what is called "The Rapture." The rest of us --- the so-called "left behind" --- suffer seven years of tribulation and death before the victory of the militant Christ, as laid out in The Revelation to John.

Suppose we at UU Belmont tried to talk about Jesus in our regular services during the church year. Which of these contradictory stories about Jesus will different members of our congregation think about or believe in? What other horrible or totally trivial things done in Jesus' name will get between some of us and *any* story about Jesus? It's hopeless; in my opinion we cannot make use of the grown-up Jesus in our regular services.

It is the third story that really fascinates me: Jesus the Triumphant Messiah. Why in the world do people still believe in the Second Coming of Jesus? A prediction that does not come true for two thousand years should be a dead letter. Yet this belief persists among Christians; you see it around you every day: Jesus will come any day now. This fixed preoccupation of billions of people tells me that the Second Coming of Jesus is more than a tradition; I think it has deep roots in the human psyche. What are these roots? I have a speculation.

In his Preface to the Beacon Press edition of *The Jefferson Bible*, Forrest Church writes, "I define religion as our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." Perhaps this is too simple a distillation of religion, but it does zero in on a central question: How does each of us respond to the fact that we must die? Seems to me that belief in the Second Coming of Jesus is a kind of avoidance, a coded response that folds our personal death into a dramatic common catastrophe. "I must be *very* important since my own death is part of the apocalyptic close to all human history!"

The death of each of us *is* like the Second Coming of Jesus in important ways: First, it is of course catastrophic --- to us and to a handful of people close to us. Second, we do not know when it will come. Third, there are those now alive who will witness our death.

But the Second Coming of Jesus occurs simultaneously for everyone. In contrast, each of us dies alone, even when we are in the arms of loved ones. A current movie has the title, *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*. My wife Carla and I are friends for the ends of our *personal* worlds. Of course, we are sad that the completion of our two lives will most likely not occur together, as they would at the Second Coming of Jesus. But we cheer ourselves up

with the possibility that we may die in an airplane crash or in some other common catastrophe.

Suppose we accept that the Second Coming of Jesus is our coded response to having to die. Then we realize the power of Jesus's apparently impossible rules of pure ethics and morals. How do you want to live your one and only life? How can your satisfactions and pleasures be deep, not superficial? How will your completed life influence your children, your professional colleagues, and your friends? In brief, how do you want to live *now* so that you will be able to look back on your life with satisfaction? Our lives are in constant tension between the purity of these questions that surround our own death and the requirements of ongoing living: for example, we have to *earn* a living, many of us are under pressure to make a profit for our company, we want to protect our nation against terrorists.

So thinking about Jesus' life and teachings may help us to think about a central tension we all face: the awesome clarity that comes from knowing we have to die and the complicated joy of living our lives in the meantime.

Most of us will decide NOT to think about Jesus, either for ourselves or in a group. To tell a Unitarian-Universalist what to believe is hopeless anyway; to tell a Unitarian-Universalist how to act is like shouting orders at a cat. But maybe a small group in our church will choose to study some of the million stories about Jesus. Perhaps this small group --- we few, we happy few, we band of brothers and sisters --- can achieve our goal, which is to justify the label that the United States Internal Revenue Service places on UUBelmont: that we are a Christian church. Now, *that* is irony.

READINGS

1. *The Gospel of Jesus according to the Jesus Seminar*, by Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, 1999, the Polebridge Press. Be sure to read pages 107-109, where Funk explains how members of the Jesus Seminar voted on which reported sayings of Jesus are "historical;" these stories Funk put into a single narrative of Jesus' life. *Result:* The sayings and life of Yeshu, a Jewish traveling preacher. Total, about 120 pages, about \$10.

2. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, by Marcus J. Borg 1995, HarperCollins Paperback. One person's search for the historical Jesus. Borg's Jesus is essentially our traveling Jewish preacher Yeshu, whom he calls Yeshua. He describes this traveling preacher in much more detail than in the first reference. Total, about 140 pages, about \$10.