

2009.03.22 Who Is My Neighbour?

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Rev. Dr. Steven Epperson, Parish Minister

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UCV

Deep in the night of December 18, 1551, Venice's Council of Ten, charged with maintaining the security of the Republic, sent out teams of secret police to make a wide series of arrests. This security action was prompted by testimony given by an informant to the Inquisition that dangerous groups of heretics infested the city—heretics who taught that state coercion was incompatible with holy scripture and, even more disconcerting, these rank enemies believed that "our Lord Christ..." though filled with virtue..."is not God conceived by the Holy Spirit but is only a man born from a human seed."

For two years, prior to that fateful night, an extraordinary group of Christian humanists, inspired by the Reformation movement taking place in Europe, quietly taught a radical gospel that Jesus was the son of human parents, a man like all others, and a teacher of a clear, passionate ethic of pacifism, compassion, and service. One of those caught up in the December heretic dragnet was a skilled metalworker by the name of Zuanjacommo Spader. When hauled the next day before the Council of Ten, who demanded to know what the radicals were teaching, the craftsman replied bravely, knowing that his life hung in the balance, "we do not have any other writing but [the Bible]....Our life is not to take things that belong to others"; we are "to help everyone." And those who read the Bible to me, like the cobbler Bartolomeo, speak "quite a lot about our needing to love one another, and that we should never do to others things we would not wish done to ourselves."

They were metal workers, housekeepers, silk weavers and corner store merchants, women and men who gathered quietly in workplaces and homes in Venice, for an all too brief period of time, to critically read, ponder, and discuss a book that had been closed to them and placed off limits for twelve hundred years. They were inspired by a clandestine network of teachers—a group of gifted scholars and dissident priests—who encouraged them to read and understand the Bible. And what they discovered, much in the humanist spirit of the Renaissance, was that Christ was no longer a mystery whom only the doctors of the Church could interpret; not a mystery, but a human being with whom they could identify, and whose moral precepts they could embrace and live. *This* was their hope—an intensive effort by people like us, to fulfill what they saw as the ethical commands emanating from the very source of their belief and action in the world. Before the Council of Ten, his lethal inquisitors, the young artisan Zuanjacommo Spader affirmed simply that: "Our life is...to help everyone...to love one another...and never do to others things we would not wish done to ourselves."

Almost immediately thereafter, Zuanjacommo, his wife Angelika, and a silk weaver named Zuanmaria disappeared into dungeons of Venice; others were executed. The radical anti-trinitarian movement was smashed, and its surviving members went into hiding and exile. (see John Martin, *Venice's Hidden Enemies*...Univ. of California Press, 1993, pp. 99-112)

I've told this story about the 16<sup>th</sup> century Venetian anti-trinitarians for a reason; essentially it's a way for me to enter into, and to assert the relevance of the Fourth Source of our Unitarian tradition along with its five companion Sources. First let's remember, that following a preamble that reads "the living tradition which we share draws from many sources," we cite direct experience with transcending mystery, words and deeds of prophetic women and men, and wisdom from the world's religions as three of the sources of our living tradition. Continuing from there, the fourth source identifies "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbours as ourselves."

If we grabbed on to that source, those words, like a thread, and then followed it back into the labyrinth of the past, we would discover that it leads from us, sitting here today, right back to that kangaroo court on December 19, 1551; that death dealing court where Venetian anti-trinitarians courageously asserted that from the Bible directly—from Jewish and Christian teachings—they believed that “our life...is to help everyone” and that we should “love one another.” As well, if we grabbed on to that source, those words, like a thread and followed it, we would discover that it leads not only to the well-springs of our UU tradition and history, but to *living* congregations of Unitarians in Great Britain, North America, India, the Philippines; to those and others around the world, and *directly* to the members and ministers of our Partner Church gathered and worshipping today in Brasso, Romania.

For over four hundred years, the affirmation that “Jewish and Christian teachings...call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbour as ourselves” has united and inspired Unitarians in outlook and action. It is an affirmation that has enabled Unitarians to bridge divisions of class, gender, age, nation, and time within our own communities with its clear, common call to an ethical life of compassionate service; of setting self aside, or rather, *in discovering self*, discovering who we are and what kind of world we aspire to create and sustain in and through concrete acts of justice and compassion. Standing behind and supporting many of the Principles that Unitarians affirm as essential to our individual and communal self-definition, is this fourth Source of our living tradition: justice, respect, the inherent worth and dignity of each person, acceptance of one another, equity and compassion: these are of the very essence of a religion worth embracing as one’s own.

Religion, real religion, calls on us to stand for justice, for the voiceless and the weak; it provokes us to reach out in acts of kindness and compassion to the stranger and the outcast, of cultivating empathy and defying the powerful. Vastly different from feel-good spiritualities and the narcissism of much of what passes for modern culture, is our fourth source affirmation. A source that expresses the insight and resolve of what’s best and enduring in Jewish and Christian teachings: and that is to respond to that mystery which works upon us and through us to find meaning and relevance in a morally neutral universe through a living, concrete commitment to care for the other; to love our neighbour as ourselves. And though we are flawed and all-too-human; and though our song may be at best a “broken hallelujah,” as Elliott sung to us in our meditation, that call to love the neighbour, the other, the call to a commitment of care, is something that Unitarians have understood and tried to live for a long time.

If that’s the case, then you may wonder with me about something that occurred recently within the Canadian Unitarian Council. Several years ago, the CUC engaged a Task Force to review our Principles and Sources with the help and participation of our member congregations. The intent of the Task Force was to discover if the Principles and Sources were adequate as a statement of self-definition of our movement in Canada, or whether they should be emended or re-written. Workshops and meetings took place across the country in 2006-07, and the results were presented at the CUC ACM in Vancouver two years ago. Overall, the Task Force concluded that there was “no clear cut call to re-write the Statement of Principles and Sources, though there were a few areas of concern that merited further investigation.”

Specifically, the Task Force Report observed that there was “significant concern expressed regarding the explicit naming of certain religions,” that is to say, Judaism and Christianity, as Sources of our living tradition. Noting that “the issue of explicitly naming “Jewish and Christian teachings” evokes some passionate [negative] responses,” that it was seen as “discriminatory and exclusionary”; noting as well, that “the thought of removing ‘Jewish and Christian teachings’” from the Sources “also evokes passionate responses,” and that taking this reference out may risk alienating a significant number of our members, and that if “no specific religions are named, it may look like we don’t have any specific historical heritage at all, and that we lack roots and depth.” Therefore, in view of all of the above, the Task Force, in time-honoured Unitarian manner, concluded that we “acknowledge the ambiguity,” handle it with “sensitivity,” avoid

needlessly creating divisions, and defer the issue for “further discussion.” Did you follow all of that? (see *Final Report from the CUC Statement of Principles Task Force, May 2008*, available at [www.cuc.ca](http://www.cuc.ca))

Unitarians do not have a creed. We are not a dogmatic religion. The genius and challenge of our faith tradition is the freedom of belief and thought it asserts, welcomes and extends to all its members. Down through the ages, we have come to see that diversity of belief in our congregations and our movement is abidingly satisfying, provocative and enriching. We actually believe and act as though the heterogeneity of persons and congregations, of our convictions, experience and outlook is a principal source of the distinctiveness and strength of Unitarianism. It is our “pearl of great price,” and we cherish and uphold it with good reason.

That said, we have congregated, we are convoked together and called out from the world, around a set of shared values: those are our Seven Principles. They provide a framework, a common, capacious table around which we, with our various beliefs and differences, can sit down and break bread together. Why these values, these principles? and not others?—because of the felt authority and life experience we’ve lived *with* the Sources that inform and back-up our Principles; they are sources from which we draw to keep our tradition, maybe even our hopes, alive. Think about them!—direct experience of transcending mystery, prophetic examples, religious wisdom from around the world, a reasoned faith, the rhythms of nature, *and* “Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbours as ourselves.”

Now I wasn’t born yesterday. I’m beginning to feel my age. I think I know something about the passions that can be evoked in our midst by even saying out loud words like “God’s love” and “Jewish and Christian teachings.” “God’s love”?—many of us have been burned by God, or rather, the god rolled out in all his capricious cruelty by those who have passed judgment upon us, the choices we’ve made, and the kind of world we cherish and would build. Yes, I think we know a thing or two about that god.

“And Jewish and Christian teachings”?—let’s be honest, since we are nearly illiterate about developments in post-Biblical Jewish and Christian religious thought, when Unitarians point to “Jewish and Christian teachings” in the Fourth Source of our living tradition, we’re pointing to the Bible; which exercise can also evoke a lot of passion—a lot of passion not all that warm and fuzzy. After reading about god-intoxicated genocides, plagues, murders, mass enslavements, and the ruthless vengeance for minor sins, after all that smiting, after all the violent, apocalyptic passages in Daniel and Revelation, and the homophobic and misogynist rantings in Paul and the Pentateuch, aren’t we just about ready to hurl the book against the wall and rip the Fourth Source right out of the page and consign it and the Good Book to the trash? Indeed. Why not just give us the old-time religion of the goddess “Aphrodite in her disappearing nightie,” or humanism’s clarion call to chuck the crutch of religion: and “dare to know! Have courage to use your own understanding.” Why not? Because I have become the kind of obstinate Unitarian who critically wants to claim it *all* as my heritage—all of it, including “Jewish and Christian teachings” that call us to a compassionate ethic of care for the stranger, the outcast, the homeless, the neighbour.

I want to experience the cultural and intellectual richness that comes with a reading knowledge of the Bible. I want to know that the crowning words of Martin Luther King’s “I Have Dream” speech comes from the Book of Amos. I want to understand the lyrics, the references to King David and Bathsheba, in Leonard Cohen’s song “Hallelujah” that Elliott sang for us after the meditation. I even want to know that when the villain in the movie *The Knight’s Tale* belittles the hero, played by Heath Ledger, by declaring: “you have been weighed, you have been measured, and you have been found wanting”—I want to know, because it increases my pleasure and my appreciation of what’s being said, that those were the words written by an angel on the wall of Belshazzar’s palace in the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible.

But it goes further than that. If I chucked the fourth source and precluded others now and in the future of drawing from it, I would lose those stories of individuals in the Bible who challenged and argued with God: Abraham demanding that God be merciful to the innocent in the city of Sodom, Moses negotiating at the burning bush, Gideon requiring proof before going to war, Job questioning God's own justice, Ecclesiastes calling all of it, the whole show, vanity and self-delusion which we must endure with compassion, wisdom and humility.

If we walk away from this source of our living tradition, then the religions of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity and Islam will lose a valuable partner, an opinionated, contrarian community—few in number but great in spirit—that I have come to know and care for. It is a community that insists on a reading of scripture that says that god—however we name it—that transcending Mystery we claim to experience as renewing, creating, and upholding life—a community that says, in effect, that god needs us in order to be faithful to the claims of mercy, love, compassion and justice—the very attributes that reside at heart of the relationship between the eternal Mystery, the world, and all of us.

If we do our job, and stand by the claim that we are explicitly linked to an appreciative, though critical reading of Jewish and Christian teachings—then progressive voices within the religions of Abraham can draw upon us as a source of strength against agents of intolerance within and beyond their own traditions. As we critically, appreciatively claim this stream of our heritage, we strengthen the bonds that connect us today with the tens of thousands of Unitarians, including our partner church in Romania, for whom the Bible is still the principal source for their religious practice and public worship; and thus, if we will do this they will see us as kin, rather than strangers. And in world divvying up between fundamentalisms of religion, politics and consumption, they and we need all the family we can muster.

If we can hold on to the thread of this source, that calls on us to respond to the mystery of love by reaching out in love through acts of kindness, standing up for the voiceless and weak, the stranger, the other; if we can do this as best we can and hold on to it and then follow it back into the past like a shining thread, it leads directly from us, here today, to that courtroom on December 19, 1551, and to the young Venetian artisan who asserted before that lethal tribunal, that the purpose of "our life...is to help everyone...to love one another... and never do to others things we would not wish done to ourselves." That man is our kinsman, our brother; he asserted that Jesus was a man, not God, a teacher of the virtues of mercy, justice, compassion and loving kindness. I wish that Zuanjacom Spader, the fearless artisan could have known and seen us as he stood in that courtroom so long ago, and that we remember and honour him this day.

Who is our neighbour? The good book tells us the slave in Egypt, the motherless child, the widow; in parable it tells us the neighbour is the hapless traveler mugged on his way to Jericho, that the despised Samaritan too is the neighbour, he who stopped to rescue the traveler and ensure that his journey could continue.

Who is that neighbour which our fourth source enjoins us to love as we love ourselves? *That is a really interesting question*, finally, when we read in Matthew chapter 25 that the sole criterion for summing up and judging one's life is whether we acted with generosity towards a god in disguise: "I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to me."

To the question of when God had met with such kindness, the reply came that it was when it was shown to persons on no importance at all. Graciousness toward that transcending mystery we reverence, by means of extending a loving hand to the distressed, runs like a saving stream, a coherent theme from Leviticus to Matthew, from the beginning to the end of creation..

May we learn and claim graciousness, mercy, justice and compassion, may we cherish and proclaim these virtues as our own valuable, imperishable heritage. And thus let "justice and compassion run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."