

Humanist Spirituality

**a reflection
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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Heritage Universalist Unitarian Church
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This month we have heard a lot of talk about truth. We've seen the truth manipulated, by both sides of the political spectrum. We've heard shrill accusations, and been witness to vicious, partisan attacks masquerading under the very name of 'truth' while making claims about opposing political candidates that are anything but true.

As James Joyce once said, "the first casualty of any war" is [the] truth."

Yes, this month, we have heard a lot of talk about truth - yet there hasn't been a lot of truth being told. History has demonstrated that anytime power-real power - is at stake in a society, the truth is often one of the first things to go. Many of those engaged in the struggle for power have, time and again, generation after generation, deemed the truth to be an expendable commodity. In our Western world, this has been true (pun intended!) both throughout our political history - and throughout our religious history.

So this morning, I want to tell you some things that other churches won't tell you - some stories from our shared past, some truths that have shaped who we are - truths that have directly resulted in the existence of both Unitarianism and Universalism, and thus, of the church in which we worship today.

Current political leaders are certainly not the first to recognize that a consolidation of power can be accomplished most efficiently by co-opting religion into the activity of the state. Piety as a political strategy goes way back. But one thing other churches are not likely to tell you is that the very doctrine upon which Christianity, as we now know it, is based - the doctrine

of the divinity of Jesus, and the creed that states a belief in that divine nature - was the result of a political process. The result, truth be told, of a political power grab by one man - the Roman Emperor Constantine.

What you may not be told in other churches is that, for the first three centuries after Jesus, Christianity bore little resemblance to the religion we know today. Instead, it was composed of a loosely connected communitarian movement - small groups of people who worshipped in a distinct, egalitarian style that retained many elements of Jewish ritual - often meeting in private homes, under the clandestine sponsorship of wealthy widows. When, over the course of a few generations, a Christian leadership structure slowly emerged, what other churches may not tell you is that many of those leaders were women.

I can say this unequivocally, as truth, because tombs have been unearthed bearing feminine names and the title "priest." In one telling case, archaeologists found a second-century mosaic depicting the holy work of someone called "Theodora episkopa" - which means "Theodora the Bishop." The interesting part of this story is that the "a" at the end of "episkopa" - a feminine ending - had been scraped almost off, and "u-s" - the masculine ending - had been scratched in next to it.

Ah, politics, power and the church! Many scholars believe this particular bit of ecclesiastical graffiti was done at a time when the church was just beginning to embark on a systematic effort to exclude women from power - and to solidify political authority in the secular state.

Which brings us back to Constantine.

By the early fourth century, the Roman Empire had lost some of its luster - not to mention much of its control over the Mediterranean area. Rome was feeling squeezed by the expansion into the region of Germanic tribes from the north and west, and Mongols from the east. Civil war and regional instability had resulted in an Empire that was deeply divided.

It was against this backdrop that, in the year 312, following a successful military offensive, Constantine rose to power in the Western part of the Roman Empire. What many churches will tell you, is the story of Constantine's battlefield conversion to Christianity, his miraculous vision of a cross on his shield, his attribution of his military victory (and thus his rise

to political power) to the God of Christianity. What they might not add, though, is how - over the next two decades - Constantine slowly and methodically created the a powerful model for marriage between church and state - the first modern theocracy.

What some churches won't tell you is that, in order to gain control of the Eastern as well as the Western portion of the Empire, Constantine made several political moves that have had a profound and perpetual effect on both religious tradition and church history. Soon after gaining the throne, Constantine granted special legal status to the Christian church. He made Sunday a state holiday. He ordered that churches be built at taxpayer expense, and he subsidized their operation.

But perhaps most importantly, for our discussion, Constantine decided to move the seat of government from its traditional capitol in Rome, eastward to Constantinople. This was, of course, a brilliant political ploy, but it also had the effect - back home, as it were - of expanding the authority, influence and power of the highest-ranking remaining public official in Rome: the Bishop of Rome - also known as the Pope.

But despite all his efforts to spread and strengthen Christianity throughout the realm, and consolidate his own power through the patronage of local bishops, Constantine was faced with a church that was theologically divided, diverse, and very difficult to manage. The more independent, local Christian groups continued disagreed among themselves, the more frustrated the Emperor became.

Thus it was that, in the year 325, Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea, calling together all the bishops of the realm - by now, it should be noted, male bishops only - and ordering them to unify the church behind one united doctrine. And to assure the outcome would be to his satisfaction, history indicates that Constantine took at couple of remarkable steps: First, he chose to preside over the Council himself; remember, this is a king presiding over a church conference that was charged with deciding church doctrine.

Second, just prior to the Council, Constantine arranged a secret meeting between his most loyal local bishop - Ossius of Cordova - and the influential bishop Alexander of Alexandria. What other churches almost certainly

won't tell you is that during this meeting, Ossius and Alexander brokered an agreement that resulted in the doctrine of the Trinity.

Thus, though the Council of Nicaea lasted months before the final vote was taken, its outcome had been pre-determined. Theologically - and this is important for us, as Unitarians- the most bitterly debated point at the Council revolved around the nature of Jesus. Was he the begotten "Son of God," and thus, created - a human being? Or was he somehow, literally, God incarnate?

Ossius and Alexander - through Alexander's scribe - introduced into the debate the word "homoousios" to describe the relationship between Jesus and God. We translate "homoousios" as "consubstantial," or "of the same substance." That phrase may sound familiar to those of you who come from a creedal Christian church, and for good reason: It is the key phrase in the Nicene Creed, a phrase that established Christianity as a trinitarian, rather than a unitarian, religion.

Now you can call this the sour grapes of the losing side if you want, but what I'm telling you - that most churches won't - is that the Greek word "homoousios" does not appear anywhere in the scripture. It was introduced by Constantine's favorite bishop. Though it helps form the basis of Christian doctrine, and is repeated in Christian creeds, it is not in the Bible.

Guess what else isn't there either: Any mention of, or explanation of, the Trinity itself. What most churches won't tell you - though they may say the words dozens of times in any given worship service - is that the phrase "father, son and holy ghost" appears only once in the entire Bible - in Matthew 28:19, in a passage known as "the Great Commission," wherein Jesus, following the resurrection, tells his followers to go forth and baptize "in the name of the Father and of the son and the holy spirit."

In the Bible, as far as the Trinity goes, that's it.

Yet we all know how pervasive is the idea of the triune God. And we now know that the Council of Nicaea played a pivotal role in promoting the doctrine of the Trinity, and thus one particular view of the nature and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Since Nicaea - which, as we have seen, was primarily a political gathering - in order to be considered a Christian, one has had to be willing to adopt and confess the Nicene Creed. Since Nicaea, Christianity has become - at least at its core, doctrinal level - an exclusive

religion, separating the orthodox from the unorthodox, the “right” from the “wrong,” the saved from the unsaved.

Which at last brings me to the other side of our family tree. I promised you, today, a look at the history of both Unitarianism and Universalism, as they relate to truth, and to the things other churches might not be willing to tell you. Like Unitarianism, which at least historically is based on the idea of the oneness, or Unity, of God, as opposed to the Trinity - Universalism is also based on a theological proposition: the idea that a loving God, a benevolent Creator, would never condemn any part of creation to eternal punishment. In the end, as Hosea Ballou put it, we will all be reunited with God.

In short, the Universalists never accepted the idea of Hell.

Now you might wonder, what does Bill mean, “accept the idea of Hell.” First he tells us the Trinity isn’t a Biblical concept - but surely, Hell is - right? Well, yes and no. Indeed, though the word “trinity” is not in the Bible, and the phrase “father, son, and holy ghost” only appears once, the word “hell” appears throughout the Bible - or so we might think. But what other churches may not tell you, is that it all depends on the translation.

In the Old Testament, most versions refer to a place called “Sheol” - the traditional Jewish name for the mythical underworld, somewhat akin to the Greek concept of Hades. Yet more conservative or evangelical translations of the Bible might insert “Hell” where “Sheol” appears - thus inserting a more modern concept completely foreign to the Jewish writers of the Torah.

Which leaves us with the New Testament, where you might expect we would find extensive reference and comment on so important a place as Hell. But the truth is, the word “hell” appears only 13 times in the New Testament - more than half of those in the Gospel of Matthew. And often, where in our English translations it says “Hell,” the Biblical author was actually referring to a place called “Gehenna.” Gehenna, or the valley of Hinnon, was a literal place just southwest of Jerusalem.

Let me tell you what I learned about Gehenna in my graduate-level New Testament class at the Disciples of Christ seminary in Tulsa, Oklahoma. The valley of Hinnon was an ancient Mediterranean version of Mount Rumpke out in Fairfield - in other words, it was the town dump. Now back then, the bodies of criminals and social outcasts, as well as dead animals, were

dumped in Gehenna, along with the trash. And - as untended and untreated garbage is prone to do - occasionally, thanks to the buildup of large amounts of methane, through the process of spontaneous combustion, Gehenna would burst into flames.

Imagine the impact this had on the minds of those in Biblical times. Jews were very meticulous about the proper burial of dead bodies. The worst thing a devout Jew could imagine was to have his or her body - because of law-breaking or social ostracism - thrown unceremoniously into the town dump, where sometimes at night, flames raged throughout the valley.

As I say, this is what I learned in a Disciples of Christ seminary - in a class where I was the only Unitarian Universalist, studying alongside maybe two dozen other future ministers of much more conservative denominations. I'm willing to bet today that I'm the only graduate of that class who's ever stood up in their church and told his or her congregation about this strange origin of the word we read as "hell" in the New Testament.

Let's move now from the question of translation to the question of insertion, and back to the time of the Council of Nicaea. Here's something else that I learned in that conservative seminary: The Gospel of Mark - which is commonly agreed to be the oldest of the Biblical gospels, and thus written closest in time to the actual occurrences it depicts - contains an interesting scholarly controversy that you probably won't hear about in most churches.

All the oldest existing manuscripts of Mark end at chapter 16, verse 8 - where Mary Magdalene and two other women discovered Jesus' empty tomb. What you may not know is that verses 9-20 were added later, as much as centuries later. Included in these extra lines is an important statement by the risen Jesus, which has often been used as a justification for the concept of Hell and the idea of eternal damnation: "He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned."

The blatant insertion of such a doctrinal statement into gospel texts was, perhaps again, reflective of a power struggle ongoing within the church at the time. In the third century, a bishop named Origen of Alexandria was preaching what can only be called an early version of Universalism - arguing that Jesus had died so that everyone would be saved. Not could be saved, but would be saved. Fifteen hundred years later, Hosea Ballou brought Origen's

argument into the modern world, and initiated the flowering of Universalism in America.

But that was, indeed, 1500 years later. Origen's belief that a loving God would never exclude part of creation from ultimate reunion with its Source, was roundly criticized and highly controversial in his time - and was, in fact, officially declared heresy in the 6th century at the Council of Constantinople.

Thus we have completed a picture that other churches probably will tell you about. The foundational ideas underlying both Unitarianism and Universalism are not considered acceptable beliefs - not considered truth - within the Christian church. By the end of the sixth century, both concepts had been declared heretical by the vote of church councils.

Yet as I said in the beginning, I believe all truth is relative. Ours is a church, and I am a minister, who will seek to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and (sometimes even) nothing but the truth. Ours is a church where, if you think you're being told something that's not the truth, you have not only the right, but the obligation, to speak up - because ours is an inclusive religion, one in which your truth is just as valid as my truth.

Before I close, let me say just one more thing about religion, and about truth. As the story of Constantine's heavy-handed manipulation of Christian doctrine indicates, there is a long-standing, if uneasy, alliance between church and state - an alliance that our nation's founding fathers and mothers wisely counseled and legislated against. Ever since the Council of Nicaea, the ability of, and the desire of, those in political power to co-opt religion for their own ends has become increasingly dangerous. The 20th century offers horrifying evidence of where this can ultimately lead.

What some churches won't tell you is that the greatest mistake that can be made by religion - let's talk truthfully today about mistakes - the greatest mistake religion can make is to meekly acquiesce to a morally bankrupt political leadership - to abdicate its historic, prophetic role to perpetually call - from outside the halls of power - to call society's leaders back onto the path of justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. For believe me - those in power always need to be reminded of their ethical obligations. Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

In our troubled and divided times, may our church be a community in which, and through which, those in power are held to account, and held to the high standard of truth. May ours be a church where the truth will set you free.

Amen.