

unitarian views of Jesus • an introduction

introduction

People often ask what Unitarians believe about Jesus. Our traditional emphasis on the freedom of belief and our rejection of dogma mean that there is no single answer. It would be fair to say that Unitarians see Jesus as a man, a human being in every sense, rather than as an object of worship. They do, however, see in him, in the words of the Reverend Cliff Reed, 'a revelation of the God who is immanent in all people'. and they try to follow his teaching. This leaflet provides the perceptions of four contemporary Unitarians on what must always remain a central and controversial religious issue.

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The continuing fascination of Jesus as a man and as a religious symbol derives from his constant gnawing away at our collective and individual consciousness.

Because he put his finger on what is wrong with our lives in a way that no one else has done before or since, and shown us the way out, we have not been able to forget him. But because he has been remembered, he has constantly suffered at the hands of those who have sought to explain him, tame him, idolise him or generally make him fit in with their own particular purposes, needs and desires.

Jesus cannot be neatly categorised. The Gospel records themselves are usually enough to give the lie to any cosy misconceptions and, when these records are linked to the ongoing experience and thought of the Christian community, it is clear that Jesus continues to challenge us and defy our attempts to tie him down.

While Jesus was, like all people, a unique individual, he was not other than human. He was our brother, sharing the same human lineage as us. If we speak of him as 'Son of God' it is to express his own intimate relationship with the Divine, which we are called to share. If we speak of his birth in terms of Incarnation it is as something that is true of every human baby.

The life and ministry of Jesus was an enfleshment of creative power, supremely that of love. This can remake human beings by revealing to them their roots in a divine creation, their reclaimable goodness and wholeness, and their oneness with each other and this glorious universe.

Jesus was the focus of a dynamic community dedicated to the remaking of humankind. In it was glimpsed the kingdom of God that he proclaimed. It lives, as does his spirit, wherever people seek to follow him on the Way of love, regardless of the niceties of theology and doctrine, the boundaries of sect and faith-tradition.

Cliff Reed

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As soon as I could utter a prayer I was encouraged 'to ask Jesus into my heart', with little understanding of what this meant, beyond it being somehow necessary for the salvation of my soul. This concept of Jesus created in me a confusing mixture of guilt and aspiration; yet even as I shook off such doctrines, the question of who Jesus was continued to haunt me.

In the Gospels Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say I am?" and that question has been answered in countless ways ever since. Jesus, perhaps more than any other figure, has become 'all things to all people' – shaped in the image of human need, aspiration or ignorance – a radical freedom fighter, an ethical teacher, a healer, a Saviour – for others an irrelevance. My initial response to that question is, that 'I don't know'. In the words of Leslie D. Weatherhead, I describe myself as a 'Christian agnostic' – drawn to his teachings – whilst realising my understanding will always be incomplete and based on fallible Gospel records.

From the glimpses we have of him, I perceive Jesus as a rare individual, blessed with the mystic's vision; the 'shaman' figure transcending cultures. I see a teacher of subversive wisdom, his pithy sayings turning conventional worldviews up-side-down and offering the 'Kingdom of God' to the poor and dispossessed. I see a man who flagrantly challenged

purity laws, by feasting with social out-casts and women. I intimate something of his charismatic and compassionate presence, enabling people to tap into their innate healing energies. I perceive in Jesus, a 'roundedness'; his life a balance between social out-reach and inner contemplation; his teachings both comforting and disturbing; his concept of the divine, embracing masculine and feminine attributes. I see a man prepared to die in defiance of religious and political authorities. The meaning of his crucifixion and claims of 'resurrection' remain a mystery, but resonate on some inner, archetypal level.

The theologian Wilfred Cantwell Smith points out that the root of the word 'believe', in Greek and Latin, means 'to give one's heart to'. It is not so much what I believe about Jesus, but the growing reality that I believe in him, in some indefinable way; and I find, to my surprise, that in my 'heart' response to this enigmatic figure, I am redefining for myself the language of childhood.

Sheena Gabriel

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I would say it is entirely possible to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus AND be a Unitarian.

When I look at Jesus I am not, in fact, seeing God. Instead I am seeing a reflection of God – perhaps a perfect reflection – and in this sense I see Jesus as divine.

What I deny is the DEITY of Jesus. I don't believe Jesus is God. This is why, among other reasons, I'm a Unitarian.

In Jesus I see the Christ, the anointed, the chosen. When I say that I mean that I draw a distinction between the human Jesus and the Christ

How do I do this? Well, by saying that Jesus is the man and Christ is who he was called to be. Jesus is the human, Christ is the divine calling and promise that worked within him – and in Jesus these two things, for me, seem inseparable.

In Jesus I see someone who so fully opened himself to his calling that I cannot see where the human ends and the Christ (the calling, the anointing) starts - yet he remained fully human. I see him as a human chosen to reveal God.

He is my saviour in that he shows me the right way to live and a way to see the world. He teaches me to love other people, and he teaches me that some things are worth dying for.

I try to follow the teachings of the man Jesus, I honour the Christ that was in Jesus, but I do not worship either, because worship is addressed to God alone. Jesus is my 'way-shower' and points me to God.

I hope that others can see a little of the Christ in me – a calling, an anointing – and I try to see the Christ in others; which is another way of saying 'see the divine in everyone' or 'affirming the worth and dignity of all'.

Ant Howe

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For many of us brought up in post war Britain, culture and religion were, I think, still closely intertwined. The Christian story and particularly the central character of Jesus, were everywhere. It was only when I reached my teenage years that religious doubt started to creep in and by then Jesus was well and truly within me, integrated, as the psychologists say. Raised on the Ladybird Book of Bible Stories, I found Jesus a real and comforting presence in my life.

A few years ago an interesting book called The Jesus Mysteries was published. Its authors put forward the possibility that Jesus had never actually lived, but was rather a God from the pagan Mystery tradition. I was interested by my appalled reaction to their thesis. Jesus for me has to have been a real flesh and blood person who struggled with the issues of his day as well as with the eternal struggles of being human. It is those very human glimpses of Jesus that shine through the Gospel narratives for me. The man who lost his temper and

overturned money changers' tables in the temple, the man who admitted the narrowness of his thinking when confronted by the Gentile woman at the well, the oh so human doubt expressed in the Garden of Gethsemane, the kindness and compassion of one who knew what it was to be human and to struggle and suffer, the anti-establishment rebel who mixed with the untouchables of his society. It is this Jesus who gives me a clear and unequivocal moral compass – love one another, forgive one another, recognise your own faults. This Jesus stands apart from the history of the western world, from colonialism, from capitalism, from the Crusades and Inquisitions that Christianity embarked on in His name. This Jesus stands apart from the violent manner of his death and the church doctrines that arose from it. Resurrection and atonement of sins are not a theology that speaks to me. But what does speak loud and clearly is Jesus' mythic quality combined with his earthy reality, this inspirational being, who left us a hugely potent legacy contained in fragments of text, reminding us, again and again, of the power of love.

Sarah Tinker



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