# The Way of Yeshua

by Hollis Huston

> A system of morals is presented to us, which, if filled up in the true style and spirit of the rich fragments he left us, would be the most perfect and sublime that has ever been taught by man.
>
> — Thomas Jefferson, *Syllabus of an estimate of the merit of the doctrines of Jesus*

Jefferson, as he took scissors and paste to the Bible, didn't think he was defacing the Word of God. He hoped rather to reveal the prophetic teaching that had been "disfigured by the corruptions of schismatising followers." In a similar spirit, William Ellery Channing thought that, by rejecting doctrines of the Trinity, predestination and Original Sin, he would recover a Unitarian and "pure Christianity." Ralph Waldo Emerson revered Jesus as one of "the true race of prophets," who "alone in all history, … saw that God incarnates himself in man;" but "what a distortion," he lamented, "did his doctrine and memory suffer in the same, in the next, and the following ages!" as quarrels within church and school obscured the meaning of Incarnation. Theodore Parker shocked the majority of Unitarians by demanding that we "consider what is *Transient* in Christianity, and what is *Permanent* therein." Like Reformers through the centuries, Parker drew a bright line down the thoroughfare of doctrine in order to save the Christian religion from folly, idolatry and sin; only under the knife of a severe surgeon could the body of Christian doctrine survive to support "that sweet music which kept in awe the rulers and their people, which cheers the poor widow in her lonely toil, and comes like light through the windows of morning." Ethelred Brown was inspired to a lifetime's Unitarian ministry in Jamaica and Harlem when he "discovered [by reading Channing] that in America there were Christians who did not believe in the Athanasian creed."

Early Universalists saw themselves as Christians who had rediscovered the original gospel of universal salvation wrought by the life and work of Jesus. John Murray preached that God "had by his grace delivered up Jesus Christ, once for *all*, gave him to be a ransom for *all*, and that he is therefore the Saviour of *all*." The Winchester Profession of 1803 declared that "there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ." Even humanist Universalists of the last century such as Clinton Lee Scott, a signer of the Humanist Manifesto of 1933, continued to affirm "the moral leadership of Jesus," who was "one of the great teachers of men." At the time of consolidation between Universalists and Unitarians in 1961, Universalists would have been content to affirm reverence for "our Judeo-Christian tradition" in the first UUA statement of Principles.

For Unitarian Universalists of the present day, the question of whether our principles and values lie within or without the boundaries of Christianity may seem quaint and scholastic. The question has been settled, and our association of congregations is not, operationally speaking, a member of the Christian community. We walked out, and they were glad to shut the door. Because we do not claim membership, orthodox Christian communities rarely fight the kind of intense and intimate battles with us that our American founders knew. In fact, conservative Christians hardly know we

exist. We for our part forget that our founders were often reviled and persecuted by Unitarians of their time. The bitter controversies and character assassinations that swirled around Jefferson's deism, Emerson's transcendentalism and Parker's merciless historical criticism are now so much dust on the bookshelf.

Although some of us identify ourselves as Christians of a sort, many more of us do not. The faith of Channing and Parker, that there could be in America a Unitarian Christianity, appears dubious in the light of history. The difficulties of definition are enormous. The very phrase "Unitarian Christianity" is a historical oxymoron. Can Unitarian and Trinitarian theology by harmonized? Official Christian theology is Trinitarian and directly contradicts our Unitarian position on the nature of God and of Jesus. For Christians, Jesus is The Son, one of the three equal Persons of God—and therefore when they speak of Jesus they are speaking, perhaps among other things, about God on earth. For a Unitarian on the other hand, God can be only one (and some Unitarians say they believe in one god "at most"); and Jesus is therefore, though one may revere his teaching and the conduct of his life, secondary to the divine values that he represents. For one who would be a Unitarian Christian, Jesus is a truly extraordinary or unique human being, endowed perhaps with divinity; but our reverence does not meet the standard of Christian theology.

A second difficulty is that the subtext of our heretical traditions—our reverence for conscience and the "free and responsible search for truth and meaning"—defies the common Christian claim of exclusive revelation. Can a religious body that defines itself by a set of principles rather than by a confession of faith affirm a faith in the exclusive divinity of a particular person, and in historical channels of his authority? If a Unitarian Universalist claims to be a Christian, she is redefining Christianity.

And so we are led to a third question: whose definition of Christianity shall the discussion assume? Our ancient theological professions—Arian, Pelagian, Socinian and Arminian heresies—have been on the losing side of churchly power plays. We therefore have through our history held a vested interest in tolerance, respect for conscience and freedom of inquiry. We cannot be sure, given the sufferings of some of our bravest people at the hands of their religious fellows, that if we had been powerful enough to establish our beliefs we would not have persecuted others as they persecuted us. It is nevertheless true that our limited experience of coercive power helps us to see coercion as the worst of evils. Our deepest, often unspoken article of faith is that truth is best served by the free play of revelation in the hearts and minds of individuals. We see the history of revelation as a diverse, tempestuous and always incomplete process that will not rest in static definitions.

By the light of our inner convictions therefore, our historical heresies—every one of them—were legitimate interpretations of the Christian faith, reverent corrections to a tradition that had lost its way. We would, if we could, continue to offer them. We would always like to keep talking on our issues. But it is the nature of power to declare an end to conversation, and Christian power has, on the whole, followed that nature. Though some of our insights, by virtue of their intellectual force and emotional strength, inspire continuous insurrection within Christian communities, we have lost the struggle for formal recognition there of our beliefs. It is for this reason that we cannot declare ourselves Unitarian *and* Christian without renewing an ancient war over the definition of Christianity.

> I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
>
> — John 14:6

Much devolves, in the relationship between Christians and Unitarians, on a point of Christian Scripture. The Johannine author places in the mouth of Jesus the classic statement of Christian exclusivism, denying the truth and salvific power of all other religious traditions. Our faith in ongoing revelation, on the other hand, withholds such ultimate and exclusive authority from any person, institution or body of writing. The passage assaults our deepest value, and where Christians insist on its truth and primacy they make it impossible for us to sit down with them. Yet there are many Christian communities who wish to be in fellowship with us. When they reach out to us they suspend the force of John 14:6.

A Unitarian Christianity would not identify the Jewish prophet as a second "person" of Trinity, nor would identify him with God. A Unitarian Christianity would not assign to any person the position of gatekeeper for God, and would insist that any person who makes such a claim is self-convicted of idolatry. We would hope—and many Christian scholars support our hope—that the prophet did not say what the Johannine evangelist attributes to him. The scholars of the Jesus Seminar, who have renewed the search for a historical Jesus, attempting to separate the authentic from the inauthentic—the permanent from the transient—in the diverse traditions of early Jesus narration, have placed the entire Gospel of John under suspicion. Joseph C. Hough, President of Union Theological Seminary in New York, invokes a spirit of repentance and a new theology confessing that "our exclusionary theology has led Christian groups, church leaders, and churches as a whole to unspeakable sins against other Christians, other religions, and against God."

Christians are arguing on these matters. They have always argued. We come from those arguments and have a stake in them. It will matter to us and to our children who prevails, in the various Christian divisions and denominations, at various times and places, in their argument over authority. But this kind of conflict measures its stages not in months or in years but in generations. In the meantime we must decide how to orient ourselves toward the precious resources of Jewish and Christian scripture, the word quite literally in whose interpretation we were born. In this period of absurdity, a period that may last indefinitely long, is it too much to suppose that we might reclaim our role as interpreters?

Not least of the obstacles to reclamation is our self-inhibition. In the period of reaction and hostility from which we are now emerging, though we professed interest in world religions, we forbade mention, in too many of our congregations, of the church down the street and the synagogue around the corner. Yet the prophetic message of the person whom Christians call Christ, and the Israelite prophetic tradition that he parsed for his first followers, are a legacy given to us as fully as it is given to any Catholic or Baptist. To study this person's life and ministry, or even to follow in his path, is not the same as to agree with Christians on the nature of that life and ministry. Our way of following, in fact, has always been to disagree; and if we fail to maintain the distinctive Unitarian and Universalist interpretations of our Jewish and Christian legacy, we give up

the oldest chapters of our story.

We should begin our challenge at the beginning—with the very name of the person in question. We cannot call him "Christ." To call him by that name is to surrender to Christian interpretation of a Jewish prophet. Their insistence that he was "christos" or "anointed"—the "messiah" and anointed heir of the kings of Israel, whom Jews rejected but whose kingdom was recognized by his true followers—is the point on which Jews came to be excluded and persecuted. So let us not call him Christ: but what shall we call him? The name "Jesus" raises the same red flag, for it has been so often paired with the designation of "Christ" that the two words have become effectively synonymous in Western religious discourse.

Let us be bold and go back to the sources. Jesus is not his name. The word "Jesus" is an Anglicized mispronunciation of the Latin rendering of the Greek transliteration of an Aramaic name. If we had been there, and called out to him the word "Jee-zuss," he would not have answered. If we call him by his true name, his Aramaic name, we shall exceed Christians in authenticity. We shall announce, even as we begin to speak, that we reject the authority of Christian interpretation. And we shall stake out a new path for ourselves, a path of interpretation that does not require us to decide whether we are or are not "Christian UUs." So what is the true name of this person, the name he would have recognized when he heard it? His name is Yeshua. Christianity is one interpretation (among others) of his teaching.

Yeshua's teaching, if we approach it directly, doing our best with the aid of advanced scholarship to distinguish what he said from what later partisans wanted him to have said, challenges us on our own ground, as did Emerson's Newness and Parker's abolitionism in their time. The teaching is neither a catalogue of commandments nor a self-help book toward the blessed life. The prophet is not a militant judge come to damn us, nor is he a temporizing milquetoast begging us to be nice to each other. He doesn't direct us outward toward another world, but inward toward the interior of personal and communal life. God is always with us, though we may not be with God. Each moment contains the divine domain, but we must break the moment open to find it. "Split a piece of wood, and I am there." And the search for divinity is not a search for the pure and unsullied soul, it is rather a pursuit of marked, flawed and ravaged flesh. If we are to love human beings, we must love them in their corporeality. He told the disciple to feed his sheep, and the flock must be fed: in Feuerbach's epigram "a man is what he eats" (*Der Mensch ist was er isst*). That is what Incarnation means. Word has been made Flesh. Forever. Yeshua is the originating humanist.

There are many christianities, and some of them are the ones our people have fled from. There is the church that demands we affirm what is offensive to sense on the promise of something better; the church that by abusing their own or other peoples' flesh would nurture the spirit; the church that tells the poor to accept their poverty because they have treasure in heaven; the church that counsels the terrorized wife to obey her husband because her suffering imitates the suffering of her savior. These churches have been roundly criticized by Christians among others. They illustrate the danger of reification—the peril of treating what is only metaphysical as if it were real. It is possible to speak of the spirit, of treasure in heaven, or of sacred suffering in ways that do not offend against decency but open a window on eternity; yet such discourse demands we remember that spirit is found only in the flesh, heavenly treasure in the concrete situation, sacred

suffering within the passion. Our Unitarian Universalist traditions would prevent abuses of false transcendence through radical immanence, recognizing no soul but in the body, no heaven but on earth. But peculiar idolatries, idolatries that match our vanities, tempt us in our radically immanent theology. Ours might be the church that reads good books while our brothers and sisters are beaten in the streets. Seduced by our singing diplomas, we might reject the concrete spirit of love in favor of abstractions, substituting ideologies of humankind for actual of love of this person, and this, and this…

> To love another person is to see the face of God.
>
> — *Les Mis*

Linus says that he loves mankind, it's people he can't stand, and many agree with him. But I think it's the other way around: I find that I love people, and it's mankind I can't stand. I don't of course love all people, but everything that I love is a person. Or rather, if I love anything that is not a person, I love because that thing has taken on the semblance of a person, has a personality and a relationship to me. I love the cello suites of Bach and the sonnets of Shakespeare because they read back my life to me. I love a tree, a river, a landscape because it is an old friend. I love a church, a park, or a home, because it speaks comfort to me. I love chocolate or Stilton cheese, because it fills my void as I hope a lover would. I love my country because it is as noble and as bestial a person as I am, sharing my virtues and my faults. By loving things I make them into persons. But these loves are all metaphors. If I say that I love a sonnet, a tree, a home, or a country, I am speaking figurative truths rather than literal ones. When I say I love a tree, I only know what I mean because I have known what it is like to love a person. In the realm of love, persons are the brute facts; all other entities are flights of fancy.

That's why Linus is wrong. You can't love "mankind" unless you have loved "people"—that is, persons. Having loved persons, you can only love "mankind" in a derivative and metaphorical way. Persons have ontological priority, and your "mankind" is constructed out of so many persons. Your idea of mankind is not quite the idea of any one of those persons you have known, but it is a field of possibility for all of them, like a quantum probability cloud in which actual particles might precipitate. Your "mankind," when compared to actual persons, has the disadvantage of being merely virtual. Mankind is never actually here with you, only so many persons.

> Individuals have a moral code which makes the action of collective man an outrage to their conscience.
>
> — Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*

To love humankind or one of its synonyms—humanity, The People—at the expense of persons is the definition of a Terror. A journalist recently estimated that the last century saw eighty million murders in the name of The People. Radicals, as opposed to liberals, are always saying with Marat that "Compassion is the property of the privileged classes," which means they will show you no compassion when you get in their way. Or when they think you might in the future get in their way. They think they can arrive at justice by

sheer mathematics, after purging themselves of those heterogeneous anecdotes out of which justice is built. But we long for justice only because we have known particular injustices. "There are certain deeds," wrote Peter L. Berger, "that cry out to heaven." Justice is fashioned metaphorically out of discrete violations, and we learn what justice is because something here and now is unjust. "The imperative to save a child from murder… appears to be curiously immune to relativizing analysis." Justice is not an abstraction but a concrete, bloody thought.

Yeshua will not be domesticated by Unitarians any more than by Christians. His teaching stands not only as a corrective to Christian metaphysics, but as a scourge of avowedly secular metaphysics as well. All of us who descend from the traditions of Yeshua's teaching will remember that he said the first thing is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." His next words glossed the meaning of this love for God. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Neighbor-love is not an additional commandment. Neighbor-love is the one commandment expressed operationally. We do not love God *and* our neighbor. We love God rather *through* our neighbor. Not in the face of humankind—for humankind has no face—but in only in the face of my neighbor shall I find salvation from idolatries of power, wealth or education. If you do not love your neighbor, you do not love God. Neighbors are not always easily lovable, and fallible creatures in need of forgiveness sometimes fail in neighbor-love; but declaring your love for God instead of your neighbor is a mistake. Declaring such love while hating your neighbor is a sin. Attempting to prove your love of God by hating your neighbor is satanic.

Let us therefore rejoice that Linus is still only a kid, for he is a nascent Robespierre. His attitude, once aligned with power, would no longer be cute. His preference for mankind over people is like Mao's preference for The People over persons. Mankind, *das Volk*, The People—these are abstractions from the concrete real. A healthy love for mankind, the people, humanity, or God is a humble love, a love that knows its own derivativeness and distance from the real—from persons whom we love or fail to love. To profess a love for mankind, the people, humanity, or God that is superior to a love of persons is to invoke a totalitarian state. Such professed love is a disease. The first communities that followed Yeshua knew that to profess such love or incite it in others is a sin. "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers and sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen."

Those of us who descend from the tradition that Yeshua himself interpreted will remember that the Lord requires of us only—but entirely—"to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God." Yeshua himself tells us not to look for our objects of love in Heaven, or in some other metaphysical place. For even if he will sit on the throne of glory, the righteous will not recognize him there—it was not as he sits on a throne that they have loved him. The righteous are known because they met him in his emergency, and without knowing it. "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?" They are amazed to discover that they have loved God's child by loving their hungry, thirsty, foreign, naked, imprisoned neighbor. Though "inconspicuous," these neighbors are God's children, "members of my family," siblings specifically. Love of God is a search not for glory but for humility. Only those who have found the incognito

God may rightfully speak of their love for her, and those who have found her, in their humility, choose not to speak. Ludwig Feuerbach, who elevated sociology to the status of religion, said that "Man and man, the unity of I and Thou, is God." Love of God therefore is not an escape from flesh but an immersion in flesh. It does not reject the world but identifies with the world. It is, in its flawed essence, incarnate.

The Lutheran martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from his Nazi prison cell, suffering and noting the suffering of others, that "we must live in the world *etsi deus non daretur,*" as if there were no god. To do this we must abandon "religiosity," for God is not the *deus ex machina* who will carry us to glory but the "suffering God… of the Bible, who wins power and space in the world by his weakness." The teaching of Yeshua is a humanistic teaching, a teaching born out in our conduct toward persons. Liberal readers doubt that Yeshua said "no one gets to The Father unless it is through me;" but even if he did say it, he also said that no one gets to him except through these actual persons—brothers and sisters of ours—who are least in rank. There is no direct approach; wherever we look for God and his child, we shall not find them, there is silence, they are gone. God gave himself to the world in the child, and the child is in turn an empty vessel, who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." We worship God by acting as though there were no God. We follow Yeshua by forgetting him. God did not save Yeshua from the Romans, and Yeshua will not save us from ourselves; it is up to us to heal the world, looking into one face—one human form—at a time.

Three of the four canonical gospels report that Yeshua's followers experienced, in the aftermath of his execution, a kind of victory over death. Christian doctrine has described this experience in metaphysical and apocalyptic terms that many of us find incredible, or meaningless, or dangerous; but it need not be described this way. Cautiously and plausibly described, it is still a revelation; demoralized by their master's humiliating death and their own betrayal of him, the disciples tried to resume their former lives, but found they could not. Though Yeshua had died and they had renounced him, his vision of the spiritual dimension was still in their hearts and would not leave them alone. They had been forever changed. *Damn the man!* they must have said to themselves, *he might as well still be alive.* In a time that lacked a vocabulary of interior life, they expressed this experience to themselves and to others as they would have described a physical presence. They said that he traveled with them on the road; or that he broke bread and ate fish with them; or that he tested the faith of an apostle. His nagging, ceaseless presence in their hearts forced them into a life of ministry, compelling them to disseminate the teaching that had changed them and to form communities that could ensure its preservation. This experience, in which the shattering pain of their master's death was canceled and transformed into a new life, is the basis of what is called Resurrection.

"I do not believe the Resurrection is a fact," said one of my teachers who is both a biblical scholar and a parish minister, "but I believe it is the truth." His statement is paradoxical, but the paradox reveals our mission. Liberal religion pursues what Gary Dorrien describes as a "third way" that avoids the terror of "authority-based orthodoxies" on the one hand and the aridity of "spiritless materialism" on the other. Orthodoxy and materialism agree in compressing truth onto a single plane; both declare that everything true must be a fact. We the liberal faithful have promised to declare the truth that is not

fact. How can we rescue the miraculous triumph over death, experienced in this life by Yeshua's followers, from relentless and merciless reification?

A Unitarian resurrection has nothing to do with another world and everything to do with this one. It is not a triumph over flesh, nor is it an escape from flesh. The Word never stopped being flesh, and its Resurrection is extreme enfleshment. The bloody Word has not gone to a better place. The miracle is that he is still with us *in this place*, such as it is. We shall not find him by looking for him, but when you and I set out on a journey together he travels with us in the corner of the eye, only to vanish when we know his name. Where two or three meet in the name of truth, he may be with us. There is no place to be discovered, and no time to be expected, for The Divine Domain is not to come but is among us. "What you are looking forward to has come, but you do not know it." This is the time. If there is an experience to be described as eternity, it must be now.

Eternity is not more time. To be what it must be, eternity cannot merely extend this same existence, in a paltry postgraduate term. Time is always finite, always asking the question of its end—but eternity is infinite. No amount of time is infinite. No amount of time can vanquish time, for at our back we "shall always hear Time's winged chariot hurrying near." Eternity is not more time but that which vanquishes time and makes it irrelevant. If time is a line whose vector we call "the future," eternity is a plane that intersects that line at any moment, including this present moment. We can touch eternity only right now. Eternity is the freedom available to us when we turn away from the future. That's what's so hard about it—not that we must wait or suffer, but that we must look away from the tunnels of our expectation toward vistas of a different dimension.

I have lived in the center of eternity.

—Norbert Čapek

We may think of Čapek as our Unitarian Bonhoeffer because, like Bonhoeffer, Čapek died in a Nazi prison camp, witnessing to the glory of human freedom even in bondage. At his trial, Čapek slipped a poem into the hand of his daughter Zora, letting her know that, even amidst mass death and suffering, "my living was worth it." When in the present moment we turn toward the dimension of eternity, then the finitude of our lives no longer imprisons us, and the experience that Christians have called resurrection is available to us. It does not cancel death. It faces death and deprives it of victory. Eternity teaches us—now—that death is not the worst thing that can happen. When we live amidst eternity, we can if necessary die now, and become who we are.

The Kingdom of Heaven, Resurrection, Eternal Life—these terms have been shaped in our minds more by Christian interpretation than by the sense in which they were first spoken. When we truly declare independence of Christian interpretation as our spiritual ancestors once did, then Yeshua's root teachings become available to us again. We may then dismiss the transient metaphysics of church fathers, and search for the keys of a divine domain that is permanently here, now, among us. Yeshua told us that we don't need to speak a creed. We shall save ourselves from self-absorption neither by calling on God nor by refusing to do so. "You'll know who they are by what they produce." Not by our confessions but by our labor and its fruits shall our love be known.

The trouble with theology is that it so often forgets it is metaphorical—as if metaphor were something shameful. In such forgetfulness, the statements of theology can become metaphysical and murderous. Let us therefore read scripture without idolatry. We don't have to give up on common sense and moral sentiment. We don't have to surrender our historical and critical consciousness. We don't have to believe in walking corpses. Yeshua leaves us not a view of life but a way of living. Love of God—God's love for us and our love for her creatures—is a practice, a thing one does. No proposition can capture it, and every proposition betrays it. If we must speak of God propositionally, we may only do so with humility, recognizing the betrayal for what it is.

Nothing is complete, and thus nothing is exempt from criticism.

— James Luther Adams, *on being human religiously*

Yeshua's is not the only voice we should hear. Our principles require of us a "free and responsible search for truth," wherever that search leads. We may research the Tao Te Ching, the Baghavad Ghita, the Q'uran, the Analects, the essays of Emerson or the Gospel of Mary, the Declaration of the Rights of Man or the Gettysburg Address. We may learn from the ministry of Tutu or Mandela, King or Gandhi, Francis of Assisi or Francis David, Theodore Parker or Thandeka. But to omit from our search the scrolls of Amos and Micah, Jeremiah and Isaiah, or to ignore Yeshua's renewal of their challenge, would be to throw away the map of our journey. By reading the scrolls again, and in our own voice, we renew our claim to their intellectual, social and political power.

There is a certain kind of Christian who is very concerned about whether I am a Christian or not. There is also a certain kind of Unitarian Universalist who is very concerned about whether I am a Christian or not. I think the question is a crashing bore. Perhaps I am a Unitarian who would be a Christian if Christianity would just get it right, but I don't expect official Christianity to get it right any time soon, because we've already waited two thousand years. In the meantime I must get things as right as I can. I shall imitate my ancestors. I shall interpret Yeshua's teaching as I do the teachings of other great men and women, by the lights of my mind and my conscience, my native intelligence and my knowledge of history. Sometimes others will know better than I do. I hope then to accept instruction, but those others shall have no authority over me, for they must meet the same tests that I must meet. To recognize any other authority is against my religion.