

Wind on the Water

A Viewsletter To Encourage Unitarian
Universalist Theology and Spirituality

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The Individual In the World

Unitarian Universalism affirms "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and the "goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." These are not unique ideals, nor modern, nor even Christian. They entered Western thought about 2300 years ago.

In twelve years and eight months of reign, Alexander conquered the world - at least from the eastern Mediterranean to the edge of India - and ushered in the Hellenistic enlightenment. The philosophers stressed two themes: cosmopolitanism and individualism.

Heretofore, people took much of their place in the world by their citizenship in a particular city, but now Diogenes proclaimed himself a citizen of the world. The stoics made popular the idea that all people are cosmopolite, citizens of a single city: the cosmos.

Epicurus' goal was the good of the individual: The world is a machine; the gods exist, but have nothing to do with the world or mankind. Therefore, the individual should choose the existence that best suits him or her.

The stoics saw the world to be created by reason, and that the same

reason can be found in the depths of the human soul; therefore, if you cultivate wisdom, you can find your proper destiny. In their souls, all humans are equal.

The mystery religions of the Hellenistic era promised salvation for the individual; fulfilling one's obligations to the gods of the polis no longer sufficed. With the sole exception of Mithra, all the gods of the mystery religions had died and been revived, or had at least visited the underworld and returned.

These elements all fit together. The individual and the cosmopolitan are both enemies of the city and tribe. And both are natural allies. The only way to be cosmopolitan is to meet all people as individuals, for the essence of groups is building boundaries; friendship between people is common, but friendship between Peoples is rare if it exists at all.

To be an individual, you must create boundaries between your self and your immediate group, but since you cannot be human all alone, you must find support beyond the group.

But an individual in a wide world is less secure than a member of a tight community and therefore more in need of a religion that offers individual security. Mystery cults proliferated offering personal salvation through the god and a new community through the group.

Communication satellites and 747's are ushering in a new era of

the individual cosmopolite and of religions that compensate for the stresses of this era.

Technical Learning

There are three kinds of learning, says Edward Hall in *The Silent Language*, Anchor Books, 1973. *Formal* learning occurs when one breaks a taboo and is informed, with emotion, that that is *not* how things are done. *Informal* learning occurs when one watches other people and imitates them. *Technical* learning occurs when a teacher deliberately conveys a set of rules to the learner, for example, through a text book.

What kind of learning is appropriate for spirituality and religion?

UUs often believe religion to be a matter for technical learning. (Salvation is by ideas. Discussion is a religious practice.)

This idea made its first major appearance in the West in *Hermetism* in Hellenistic times. Hermetism is conveyed in writing, in treatises, not by masters, cults, and initiations. The belief was that anyone who studied the texts with proper diligence could become proficient, even if there were no other practitioners available; even if the practice had died out for centuries. The main text of intellectual Hermetism was the *Corpus hermeticum*, supposedly by Hermes Trismegistus.

Popular *Hermetism* consisted of magic, astrology and occult "sciences". Intellectual Hermetism

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Technical Learning, continue

had two contradictory ideas. There was a pantheistic idea, which viewed the universe as filled with god, and there was a dualistic idea, which viewed god as far above matter, so one cannot hope to come to god except by escaping the material world.

The belief in the power of the text alone to convey Hermetism was tested around 1460, when Cosimo de'Medici hired Marsilio Facino to translate the *Corpus hermeticum*. The translation brought a flowering of Hermeticism throughout Europe and still forms a basis for many "ancient wisdom" cults.

Is it really possible to learn all one needs to know about religion from books, or are teachers necessary? Are the New Age and Self-help sections of bookstores of any deep

Christ and Dionysus

Christianity is not as unique as its supporters may claim.

Hellenistic and early Roman times were fertile for the development of mystery cults, which seem to have borrowed freely from each other. For example, Christ Jesus shows a great many similarities to Dionysus (a.k.a. Bacchus).

Both were gods born of human women: Jesus from Mary; Dionysus from Semele, the daughter of Cadmus, king of Thebes and one of Zeus' many lovers.

Both were endangered as infants: Joseph and Mary had to flee with the baby Jesus from Herod. Dionysus suffered persecution from Hera [no relation], the jealous wife of Zeus. Hera put doubt into Semele's mind that Zeus was not the all-high. Semele extracted from Zeus a promise that he would give her whatever she asked, and then she demanded to see him in his glory. The fire

of his glory consumed her, but Hermes saved the fetus, which was sewn in Zeus' thigh until time to be born. Hence Dionysus is called the "twice born."

Both suffered, died, and came to life again. Jesus was crucified, buried, and resurrected. At Hera's orders, the Titans tore the infant Dionysus to pieces and boiled him in a cauldron, but he was rescued, reconstructed and revived by Rhea (his paternal grandmother).

Both Jesus and Dionysus visited the underworld and returned. Jesus visited there during the three days between his crucifixion and resurrection. Dionysus visited Hades to retrieve his mother. Also at times Dionysus visits Persephone, the goddess of Hades.

Both were gods of mystery cults which promised salvation, although Christianity ceased being a mystery cult when it ceased being persecuted and became the endorsed religion of the Empire.

In the worship of both gods, there was a symbolic meal of the flesh of the god. In Christianity, it is the communion, reenacting a ritual introduced in the Last Supper. In some of the rites of Dionysus, the worshippers would go off into the mountains, where in the mania brought on by the god, they would chase down wild animals, tear off their flesh, and eat it raw, reenacting the dismemberment of Dionysus by the Titans.

Both Christ and Dionysus are associated with the vine. In the Last Supper, Christ serves wine saying, "... this is my blood...." [Matthew 26.28] and in John 15:1-5, Christ says, "I am the true vine" Dionysus, of course, is the god of wine.

The worship of both deities can bring a kind of madness. At the Pentecost, the Holy Spirit filled the

apostles giving them the power to speak in tongues [Acts 2.1]. Dionysus brings inspiration, intoxication, and madness. The Maenads, worshippers of Dionysus (mainly women), would see signs of the god's presence in *enthusiasm* (from *en* in + *theos* god) and *ecstasy* (from *ex* out + *histanai* cause to stand).

Both cults brought social conflict. The followers of Christ abandoned their families and their positions in the Roman world. The mythology of Dionysus is replete with stories of official opposition to Dionysus and the god's bloody triumph. Indeed, the mania roused by Dionysus brought liberation from all the bounds of society, perhaps accounting for its particular appeal to women, who were more socially constrained than men.

Both gods brought their mothers to heaven. In Catholicism, it is called the Assumption of Mary (a late addition to Christian doctrine). Dionysus went into the underworld to bring his mother to dwell on Olympus with him.

Paths

One of the things we say about UU churches is that they provide a community of seekers. They do not, however, provide a single path for the seekers to follow. "There are many paths," we say. "Choose one."

But can a community of seekers on different paths truly help each other? They can provide some encouragement, true, but can they provide helpful hints, or a useful sounding board? On any journey it helps to stop to ask directions or to talk to someone who has been that way before.

Indeed, there are many paths, but isn't it true that if UU churches only provide community, all paths lead away?