

Was Jesus Married and Other Heresies

In the last two years, there were two popular culture events that revived some of those centuries-old questions about Jesus the human being and Jesus the divine being. One was Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. I didn't see it. I don't go to movies that are full of gratuitous violence, whether they are military, macho, or religious. I don't consider the crucifixion central to my faith or to my religious understanding. But I do know enough about it to know that it embodies a particular, largely Catholic view of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb who suffered for our sins. The film uses that suffering as an excuse for two hours of bloody violence. It also embodies a theology we as Unitarian Universalists rejected even back in the days when Unitarians and Universalists were both fully part of Christianity. That is the theology of substitutionary atonement, that God sent Jesus as a sacrifice for our sins. A more contemporary theological understanding of Jesus among liberal Christians is that he embodied God suffering like us and with us rather than for us, that Jesus was a human being with an extra helping of divinity, and that extra helping of divinity showed us how to locate and cultivate the divine spirit within each of us. So my theology was also a reason for giving this movie a pass. My inner Unitarian refuses to make Jesus divine in some unique way that the rest of us cannot be. Perhaps that inner Unitarian also explains why I am drawn to the other piece of popular culture that drew a lot of attention in the last two years, the one in which Jesus is very definitely human.

Dan Brown wrote a pop suspense thriller called *The DaVinci Code* that is being made into a movie. It's about what was supposedly the other passion of the Christ, the human one, the passion for another human being and for the normal relational aspects of human life. Some of you may recall an earlier controversial novel and film about Jesus, Nikos Kazantzakis's *The Last Temptation of Christ*. In

that version, Jesus fantasized on the cross about what life would have been like married to Mary Magdalene with children. To be fully human, to experience the joys and sorrows of family life, was his last temptation. According to *The DaVinci Code*, Jesus didn't just fantasize. He actually did those things. He was married, and Mary Magdalene was pregnant with his daughter Sarah when he died. In one of the more clearly fictional parts of the story, there has been a continuous line of descendents of Jesus and Mary Magdalene to the present day.

Was Jesus married? *The DaVinci Code* has a lot of flaws and errors. My sister, an art history buff, was appalled by his sloppiness with art history. But the important thing about this book, which is after all fiction, is the controversy it stirred up by raising that old question once again. Many people were surprised to discover that this question had been around for so long, the question of whether Jesus was married. For those of us who had the privilege of a seminary education, or who just pay more attention to these things, we know that this question has been just under the surface of Christianity for a very long time. And the answer matters not just to traditional Christians but also to us heretics. In the pews of many traditional Christian churches we find people whose understanding of Christianity is closer to our own than to the official message of virgin birth, resurrection, trinity and original sin. So while we are not a part of mainstream Christianity, we are close enough kin that it is a good idea to occasionally revisit the ties that bind and the differences that divide us. The question of Jesus' marriage is such an occasion.

The thoughtful and well researched answer to the question of whether Jesus was married that comes from Biblical scholars is—maybe. We don't know, but it could have been. Was the marriage at Cana actually Jesus's wedding to Mary Magdalene, who was the first at his tomb and the last to leave his cross at his death? Why was his mother so worried about running out of good wine at that event if she wasn't the mother of the groom? Didn't it seem strange that a 30 year

old Jewish male, so faithful to the traditions of his people, would be unmarried? What was he doing traveling around with twelve men and six women—wouldn't that be scandalous in his time and place? These are the kinds of questions that challenge the view of Jesus as celibate. Some of the noncanonical gospels, like the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Thomas, seem to imply that Jesus was married. And according to the Grail legend, fathered a child. Dan Brown's book, in which there is a continuous line of human descendents from Jesus and Mary Magdalene through the Merovingian kings of France, is based on the grail legend. The old French word is sangraal. If you split the word as san and graal, you have holy grail. But if you split it into sang and raal, you have blood royal. According to many scholars, the grail is not a chalice in the literal sense, a cup, but rather in the metaphorical sense, a vessel. The chalice is the ancient symbol for the mother goddess, the carrier of the bloodline from generation to generation.

When I teach UU history, I have always been frustrated to have to leap from the Council of Nicea in 325 to the Reformation in the 1500s without being able to account for any continuity in our heretical understanding. I know that those gaps are in part intentional on the part of Catholic authorities who brooked no dissent, expunging both the dissenters themselves and the records of their dissent. I can bring in some Renaissance humanism and some resistant strains of Arianism in Eastern Europe and Jan Hus to fill in part of the 1200 year gap. But in the grail legend and the carriers of that legend in Southern France, I found an important group of our religious ancestors. The Cathars in 12th century Provence were heirs to a long grail tradition. According to Margaret Starbird, author of *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, the Cathars were independent of both French royalty and the pope. Each Cathar family had a copy of the Gospels in their own language, which they read for themselves. Theirs was a nonhierarchical, nonpriestly faith in which women were equal and the role of the church was less important than the

worshipful way in which they led their daily lives. And they kept the Grail legend alive, in which the central belief was that Jesus and Mary were husband and wife and parents of a girl child. Their Jesus was fully human. So is ours. The Cathars were the object first of a crusade, and then an Inquisition, as the church tried to stamp out their heretical views.

Richard Hogan, a Catholic scholar, wrote a book called *Dissent from the Creed*, in which he describes and critiques some 31 heresies, including the Cathars. I liked most of these heresies. Aside from a few fringe groups, however, his list is not actually not multiple heresies, but rather minor variations on a single theme. That single theme is an alternative Christianity, a complete, self-contained different understanding of the facts and the meaning of the Jesus story AND a continuous tradition from the first century until today. Despite the best efforts of the church to stamp out both the records and the adherents to this alternative Christianity, it continued to survive in places like Eastern Europe and Southern France in the twelve centuries between the Council of Nicea in 325 and the Protestant Reformation in 1517. Arian Christianity, contrary to popular belief, did not die out in 325 with the Nicene Creed. It was kept alive by the Goths, the Visigoths, the Vandals and others throughout Europe, including the Cathars. The church may have suppressed its documents and persecuted its adherents, but it lives on today not only in our Unitarian Universalism but also among others like the followers of Mani in the near east and the little-known French Unitarians centered in Lorraine, home of the Cathars in medieval times.

This alternative Arian Christianity proclaimed a human Jesus. It also proclaimed a married Jesus, possibly with descendents. It proclaimed Jesus not as from Nazareth but a Nazarene, like Sampson in the Old Testament, who practiced a more rigorous Judaism that involved, among other things, not cutting his hair. It proclaimed Jesus not a poor son of a carpenter but a descendant of the royal house

of David, as is recited in the opening chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. This Jesus was educated in the Torah, a rabbi, a teacher, a prophet. This alternative Christianity defined salvation as becoming whole and living in relationship with the sacred. It was and is the religion of direct experience rather than spirituality mediated through a church that only grants access to those who accept the rules and affirm the beliefs. It is a religion that is defined by who we are and how we live, not what we believe. This alternative Christianity is the centerpiece of our own Unitarian Universalist Western religious heritage.

I think today it matters less whether Jesus was married or not than that people care so strongly about the question. Why is it so important to some people that Jesus was celibate? Does this insistence on celibacy say something about the Christian church and its attitude toward sexuality? Does it represent a denial of Jesus' full humanity in order to underscore his divinity? And lastly, how is it connected to attitudes in the Christian church and in western society in general toward women and toward committed relationships? What exactly is so bad about being married that it becomes important that Jesus not be tainted by it?

The Jesus of the Catholic Church was celibate, and that celibacy was significant in several ways. It ensured his uniqueness, because he left no descendents. It set him apart from the ordinary run of humanity. Because Jesus was celibate, priests who stand in his place are also required to be celibate. Priests as well as monks and nuns took vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. These vows demanded self-denial of three basic human pleasures, the enjoyment of the senses, of intimate relationships, and of exercising one's own autonomy. These self-denying vows supposedly derived from the example of Jesus, who survived on the generosity of friends and strangers, who entered no intimate sexual relationship, and who was obedient even to death to the will of God as he understood it.

But to elevate celibacy to a vastly superior way of being religious is to deny the basic goodness of God's gift of sexual intimacy. The best that Saint Paul could say for marriage was that it was better to marry than to burn in hell. Not a passage most people choose to have read for their weddings—they prefer the one about love. Insisting that Jesus was celibate quickly slides into denying the goodness of being embodied, of partaking of the full range of human bodily experiences. We know he ate, and slept, and walked and talked, and touched and was touched. He even allowed an unnamed woman to anoint him with costly oil not long before his death—that, too, was part of the Grail legend, in which Mary Magdalene was anointing her consort. These are all sensuous experiences. The notion that sex is somehow shameful or defiling did not come from the earthy Jewish tradition in which Jesus was raised, in which it is the duty of every good husband to satisfy his wife's sexual needs on the Sabbath night. Most scholars trace this antisexual attitude to Platonic dualism, particularly the dualism of body and soul, as well as to Gnostic teachings. So the first reason I like to think that perhaps Jesus was married is that I think we should feel free to celebrate sex and sexual pleasure as part of the goodness of creation, something to be experienced in ways that are responsible and embedded in meaningful relationships, as a valued and important part of life.

The second reason why I like to think that perhaps Jesus was married is because it makes him more fully human. Marriage wasn't just another kind of temptation, as in *The Last Temptation of Christ*. According to the gospels of both Matthew and Luke, Jesus was tempted by the devil before beginning his ministry in both the gospels. But marriage was not part of the devil's offer. His temptations were all about power, not sexuality, about using and abusing power. In rejecting the offers of wealth and political power, Jesus was defining his mission

and his ministry in terms of a different kind of power, the power that lies within each of us.

The real battle over Jesus's humanity, of course, came at the Council of Nicea in 325, when Jesus was officially elected by the bishops present to the position of second person of the Trinity, God incarnate. We Unitarians descend from the losing side in that vote. Losing an election, or a war, or any other win-lose kind of competition, never means abandoning an idea—it will always be kept alive underground and surface again in another form, another time, another place. Just ask any member of the League of the South. Since Nicea, Jesus's divinity has more and more swamped his humanity, as he became one who always existed, came down and assumed human form, and then, mission accomplished, returned to heaven. As a divine being he had and still has power that humans can use to access the divine and to be transformed.

But we heretics, including the Arians and the Cathars as well as Unitarians from the 16th century on, we value Jesus's humanity more than his divinity. If Jesus was indeed fully human, one of us, with the same divine spark that exists in all of us but one that shone more brightly, then Jesus is a source of hope and inspiration for what we too could become. It is possible for us to become like Jesus, fighting oppression, living simply, loving our neighbor, forgiving the unforgiveable, finding and bringing out the goodness in the stranger and the prostitute and the tax collector. It is also possible—this is the shadow side—it is possible to deify humanity in our identification with the human Jesus, so we have to be careful about going too far to the opposite end of the spectrum, to make Jesus only human rather than fully human.

These two views, the one emphasizing divinity and Jesus as wholly other, the second emphasizing humanity and Jesus as brother, these are two fundamentally different approaches to the realm of the sacred. Catholicism and

many conservative protestant Christians embrace the divine view of Jesus, Jesus as other, Jesus as a bridge to the unreachable God. That conception would be sullied or diminished by a married Jesus. Unitarians, Universalists, and liberal Christians see Jesus as brother rather than other, a model, a gateway to the divine through his humanity. Theologically, we religious liberals would prefer a married Jesus, simply because getting married is a very human thing to do and marriage would affirm his humanity.

Finally, my feminist self wants Jesus to be married. I know that many feminists see marriage as a limiting institution in which women are subordinated to men and prevented from developing their full humanity. It can be, but it doesn't have to. It is true that marriage steers the course of our lives in different ways from being always unmarried, and both are in turn very different from being widowed or divorced but having experienced marriage along the way. Jesus married would have been a different person from Jesus unmarried. Not necessarily better or worse, but different. Different in having to make more compromises. Different in having more divided attention and allegiances. Different in having a first-hand perception of both the ways in which women and men experience life differently but also in which we partake of a common humanity that transcends those differences.

According to the Gospel accounts, Jesus had a very liberated understanding of women. I like to think that he had that understanding in part because he lived with a woman in an intimate relationship. His encounters with women were many, and always in those encounters he treated women as valued persons and fully human. The woman taken in adultery, the woman at the well, the daughter of the Roman centurion, the woman who anointed his feet with oil and dried them with her hair. Mary and Martha arguing over whether it was better to do the household chores or to listen to Jesus as he taught. His stories and parables are populated

almost as much with women as with men. Yes, it is possible that he could have come to that understanding without being married. And yes, I know gays and lesbians in committed relationships that are still able to understand a great deal about the other gender in ways that derive from being in close relationship with someone of their own gender. But if I identify with Jesus as a teacher and a role model, I like to think that some of the things he understood about people and relationships he learned from experiences similar to my own, and one of those important experiences for me has been marriage.

Furthermore, if Jesus was married, then the wife of Jesus, most likely Mary Magdelene, offers a third model of woman midway between the two poles of Mary and Eve. Mary the mother of Jesus on a pedestal, Mary the perpetual virgin, Mary the self-sacrificing, self-denying mother, Mary almost as devoid of genuine humanity as the Jesus who couldn't possibly have been married. Eve the temptress, Eve the seducer, Eve the fallen woman who takes Adam and all humanity with her, Eve the begetter of original sin. Kind of limits our choices of religious role models, doesn't it? Oh, we have lots of other women in Hebrew scripture, Sarah who laughed at God, the two Tamars representing woman as victim and woman triumphing through cunning, Deborah the judge. But the gospels and the Christian tradition keep giving us either-or views of women. You can be Mary or you can be Eve, but not both. You can be Mary the studious disciple or her sister Martha the housekeeper taking care of daily life, but not both. Enter Mary Magdelene, a partner, an equal, a Jewish woman entitled to good sex on Friday nights, a woman who presumably not only sat at the feet of Jesus as teacher but also cooked his dinner and lit the Sabbath candles when he wasn't busy feeding the five thousand. Thinking of Jesus as married not only affirms his humanity, it also affirms women as worthy partners in a life journey.

So, was Jesus married? There is a yes or no answer buried in history. He either was or he wasn't. Jesus was a historically verifiable person about whom many unverifiable claims have been made, including the claim that he was celibate and the claim that he was married. The only answer we can give is, maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. Does it matter? Probably not. But what does matter is that people care so much about the question. People draw conclusions about Jesus and about marriage and about women based on whether they think he was married or might have been married or whether he was unquestionably and intentionally celibate. My human brother Jesus would probably have been married, probably to a woman, although it would have been okay with me if he was gay. The Pope's Jesus as God incarnate would not have compromised his divinity by such an earthy relationship with either man or woman.

When we puzzle over ancient texts, or ancient ruins, or ancient stories, we view them through different lenses, lenses that help us to find what we are looking for. We find our particular Jesus, the human one or the divine one, the one whose superiority derived from his masculinity and his divinity or the one whose superiority derived from his personality and his humanity. There is no way to settle the argument over whether Jesus was married when there are at least two strongly committed groups of religious people, each of which has bet the farm on opposite answers. Perhaps it's better not to know the answer, so each of us can affirm our own answer that fits with our way of encountering the sacred.

Was Jesus married? My Jesus was. Only you can decide about yours.