

No Immaculate Conception
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To summarize, there are two ideas tied to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The first is that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was conceived without any stain of original sin; the second is that Mary obtained this state only as a gift of grace, requiring no effort from her. It is my theology that there is no such thing as immaculate conception on both counts. There can not be a person incarnated free of sin, and there can be no virtue incarnated in our lives without some effort on our part.

In saying this I mean no disrespect to Catholic theology. That beautiful faith is built on many ideals and precepts that I share and affirm. Justice is an ideal which, in both religions, moves us to seek a equal and equitable society. Likewise, we speak often in churches of "love." With this word we invoke all the lovely little ordinary ways we connect with others and care for others, and within these also lies curled the beautiful ideal of capital "L" Love, that divine unconditional Love without bounds, the Love of God for each person. Such ideals inspire us to affirm and promote "inherent worth" of every person. A perfect Jesus, a perfect Mary may float in the Heaven of the mind's eye, objects of faith. Even the Buddha is depicted perfect in his insight, perfect in equanimity, compassion and joy. Each ideal inspires us to transcend the limits of today.

The problem is that these ideals separate from the facts of our existence. We see our limits, the sin and sinfulness of this existence and begin to feel very distant from the ideal. Zen appeared in Buddhism because the the ideals of Buddhism had rarified enlightenment until it was only attainable after being purified by ten-thousand lifetimes. Furthermore it's blessings had become linked with the power of the state and the complex, official, priesthood and state-sponsored rituals of an Emperor. At a time when the power of the state was fragmenting into warring states, (China, 900~1000) the ideas of Zen, where anyone could become enlightened, caught hold. There is one famous story of a water-carrier, a common laborer, working at a temple into the night. He trips and spills the water from his buckets onto the stone path. In the water, the full moon is reflected. Gazing on this the man wakes up, and becomes a bodhisattva.

Likewise the Jewish religion of Jesus' time had developed highly ritual-centered, rule-bound and idealistic forms. In contrast to these, Jesus preached a simple, direct relationship between the individual and God through prayer, devotion and good works. In their turn Christian religions, over and over, have developed ideal and ritual-centered doctrines that separate the power of the faith from ordinary people and life. In considering *theotokos*, a person able to bear the holy and most divine good into the world, there arises a tension between the human and divine.

My faith, my religious understanding that there is no such thing as human perfection, not even in Mary. People of very average character can do amazing things. Goodness is a potential, like potential energy, that becomes tangible only in action. Some may have a greater potential for goodness than others, but goodness can only become virtue, incarnated, through our deeds and works in society. There is no

goodness apart from what we do. In a similar vein there are no evil people, *per se*, only “evildoers.”

James Luther Adams, the great 20th century UU theologian said; “There is no such thing as goodness as such; there is no such thing as a good man or woman as such. There is only the good spouse, the good worker, the good employer, the good church-person, the good citizen.” the Reverend Doctor James L. Adams was a Unitarian parish minister, social activist, journal editor, distinguished scholar, translator and editor of major German theologians, prolific author, and divinity school professor for more than forty years. Adams was one of the the most influential theologians among American Unitarian Universalists in the 20th Century. Thus, one reason I chose this sermon topic was to give me an excuse to reflect again on some of his thinking and writing, because those have been so very deeply influential on all my thinking and writing.

In this one very key essay, “Five Smooth Stones: Guiding Principles for a Free Faith” [*On Being Human Religiously*, James Luther Adams, Max L. Stackhouse, ed. pp 12- 20] he invokes the central principles for understanding liberal religion in general, and Unitarianism in specific. The first is that revelation is not sealed, but continuous: our understanding of Truth requires openness to the Truth that always out-stripped any attempt to capture it in words or images. The central point of this essay, and much of his theology, is the centrality of what he calls “that commanding, sustaining, transforming reality, only in which any meaningful existence is possible.” The second stone was that true religion can never be coerced; that you cannot force someone to believe. Instead, truth relies on persuasion, dialogue, and decentralized hermeneutical authority. The third stone is that the goal of religion is the formation of Beloved Community, a just and compassionate society, on this earth, within the context of history and culture. The fourth is that there is “no immaculate conception of virtue,” and the fifth is a cosmic optimism; that the resources and potential are available in this life, in our hands and hearts, to engage in the unending process of creating this society.

Luther Adams told many stories to illustrate how the power of justice moved in human existence. Once, in Chicago he was part of a group of citizens, who were assigned the task of studying the problem of poverty relief. “At an early meeting..., a man describing himself as a “conservative” arose to protest against there being any system of relief at all.” He used the familiar argument: “I have worked hard and I have saved my money; but now, along comes the government and takes my money and gives it to these people who won’t work.” Nonetheless the man was persuaded to work with the committee and to call personally on the people “across the tracks.” “He visited family after family, saw children without proper food or housing, without shoes; he saw fathers who were ill, saw emaciated mothers trying to maintain something of human dignity...” and his attitude began to change. Finally, at a meeting while listening to an ill and suffering mother retell her story about how hard it was to get any relief, he became indignant. He jumped to his feet and almost shouted (to the poor who were giving

testimony), "Why do you people stand for this? I wouldn't do it. I would steal first. I want to know: why you don't have the spunk to start a revolution?" [*The Prophethood of All Believers*, James Luther Adams, George K. Beach ed. p.p. 180 – 181] He had awakened to the injustice of the situation. Now he felt moved for someone to do something for justice. Revolution was what came to his mind. However, violence is a poor tool for carving out a peaceful future. He was not a perfect person and one might argue that only a perfect person could bear true goodness into the world.

The doctrine of Immaculate Conception states that Mary was perfect in her goodness. She was born free of original sin and instead was "full of Grace" or God's gift of sanctification. If you knew, before this sermon, the difference between *virginal conception* and the *Immaculate Conception*, then you are in an elite group. Many Catholics get the two confused. The Virginal Conception, is the miraculous appearance of The zygote Jesus in Mary's womb. On the other hand, the Immaculate Conception is about the conception of *Mary*. Before this idea could be developed Christianity had to develop the notion of Original Sin. Neither of these doctrines are mentioned in Scripture.

In fact, all of this is part of justifying, in Christian theology, why we had to be reconciled to God. We have to be "depraved" from conception to explain why Jesus needed to die in substitutionary atonement for us. But if one doesn't accept that basic premise, that human beings are condemnable from conception, then the Immaculate conception is not needed either. I won't even go into all the troubling ideas about sexuality, like the idealization of virginal purity, which are also wound about this theology. A dogma of the Roman Catholic Christian church asserts that Mary was conceived in the ordinary way by an ordinary set of sinful parents. But, on Dec. 8, **1854**, Pope Pius IX, "urged by a majority of bishops throughout the world," solemnly declared in the bull "*Ineffabilis Deus*" the doctrine of Mary's Immaculate Conception was revealed by God and to be firmly believed by Christians.

According to the dogma, she was "full of God's reconciling grace" in that moment of conception. She was not good by her merit, not because of how anyone lived. The Catholic catechism states that she is honored for, "the splendor of an entirely unique holiness," that she was "formed as a wholly new creature, free of any stain of sin." The catechism explains that "God required, or desired, the cooperation of a creature, and so he prepared Mary to be a perfect vessel, a new wineskin." This is the problem in mixing the ideals of divinity with the ordinariness of humanity one must be diminished to make room for the other. In this doctrine Mary had to become uniquely able to bear the divine, implying that no ordinary person could.

In "Five Smooth Stones" James Adams insists the opposite: that there is no "immaculate conception". First of all, to me, this means that there are no perfect actions, just as there are no perfect people. Though almost none of us would accept the idea of 'original sin' in there is still "unoriginal sin", error, complications, and unforeseen consequences. Though we are not "depraved" we cannot avoid lack of perfection or

purity in human living. We have to accept that no act is perfectly virtuous. Or, to put a point on it, as Frederick Douglass pointed over a hundred years ago, "Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning; they want the ocean without the awful roar of its waters." [from *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglas*].

Interestingly, James Adams' essay said nothing about purity or sin. In his fourth smooth stone he emphasizes action, our cooperation with the "commanding, sustaining and transforming power." He denies that we are good outside of our actions. That is what I am emphasizing this Sunday, the importance of working to become "*Theotokos*" the bearer of grace and virtue into the world. This is the center of our UU theology, the idea that what matters most in religion are human choices, human actions, and justice within human societies. Of course we still assert Grace as the foundation. Religion should help us be grateful for all we do not earn, all the blessings of this life, and for this good Earth. "Christian Salvation" can be seen as a gift of Grace, born of inherent dignity, but it is our response to that Grace that makes tangible the value and virtue of our lives.

This fourth smooth stone is the assertion that full goodness is not born in the world, or in any person, without work. It must be incarnated in society by actions. It is not enough to think good thoughts. Furthermore, any faith that expresses itself only in daily life, in the narrow circle of close friends and family, is not a true faith of virtue. Adams attacked the idea that health of individuals, faith in cloistered or personal virtues, or healing in face of hurts caused by history is enough. Because of the third stone, it is as Dr. Martin King Jr. said, "the religion that ends with the individual, ends."

To be good religiously requires the manifestation of goodness in the creation of community, society, and civilization. Thus goodness must be part of making history, and it can thus never be pure and free of the mistakes, the mess, and the difficulties of being human. I don't know about Mary. You must decide what you think of her conception, whether it was ordinary, or tainted with sin, or immaculate. But in our lives there is no immaculate conception, of persons or of virtue. Howard Thurman reminds us of this in his poem "The Work of Christmas:"

When the song of angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 to find the lost,
 to heal the broken,
 to feed the hungry,
 to release the prisoner,
 to rebuild the nations,
 to bring peace among brothers,
And,

to make music in the heart.