

Principles and Politics

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What does it mean to be a Unitarian Universalist? Is it really the easiest religion on the planet? A place where there is no dogma, no creed, no commandments? Is it true that UU's can believe anything they want?

Well, yes and no.

Like many Unitarian Universalists, I was raised a Christian. We read the bible, memorized verses, went to Sunday School, and said our prayers at night. ("Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.") But, as I grew, I found that religion to be based on dubious assumptions, improbable claims, and fantastic predictions. I rejected the religion of my childhood as superstitious and hurtful, destructive of the human potential that was growing increasingly meaningful to me. I could interpret most of the teachings of Jesus in ways that supported my new ideals, but the church said that wasn't allowed, and so I left.

Unitarian Universalism gave me a home where I could search for truth as I found it, truth that could grow along with my understanding, meaning that could unfold progressively instead of being frozen forever in the doctrinal mists of ancient history.

Does this mean we can believe anything we want? It appears that the one thing we're committed to believing is that there isn't any one right way to believe. We don't seem to have a doctrine as much as a method. And we often use that method to examine other religions. We probe them for their inconsistencies, thereby reenacting the feats of critical brilliance through which we won our freedom from our own religious pasts. Since many of us got here by rejecting something, there's a tendency to embrace criticism and fault-finding as the basis of our religion.

But is this critical process what makes us Unitarian Universalists? Is it what we're covenanted to do together? It's true that we don't have revealed

commandments chiseled in stone that forever dictate our beliefs and behavior, but we do have a set of principles. Listen: “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

This is not a list of criticisms, things we reject. It is not a free pass to believe whatever we want, either. It is a set of affirmations, things in which we do believe. Although it’s not a creed, it’s as ethically demanding as anything embraced by other denominations.

The overarching theme of these principles is respect. We agree first and foremost to respect all people, everywhere. Then we agree to accept and encourage each other. We agree to respect everyone’s sincere attempts to find truth and meaning. But we don’t agree to accept every truth and every meaning. There are some positions which are hostile to our principles. Genocide, for example, requires a denial of the inherent worth and dignity of all people. We’re likewise committed to oppose violent crime and terrorism. We also have a list of sources upon which we draw for guidance and inspiration.

Listen: “The living tradition we share draws from many sources: Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life; Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love; Wisdom from the world’s religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life; Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God’s love by loving our neighbors as ourselves; Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit; Spiritual teachings

of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.”

These principles and sources aren't license to believe anything; they're a set of affirmations and constraints. Within these constraints, we Unitarian Universalists are committed to respect the beliefs of others. Although we agree to do this, I think it's hard for us to know how to treat each other with respect. American culture isn't rooted in respect, and we are products of that culture.

Our American culture is based on competition, on winners and losers, on getting what you want. The way we discuss ideas is a good example of this. When people talk, they often try to convince each other of something. A discussion usually takes place between two sides, each convinced that the other is wrong. And the form of the discussion is a kind of combat, an attempt to prove one's position and refute the other's. This is not a form of respect. If we respected each other's journey toward truth and meaning, we'd respect each other's points of view – even if we didn't agree with them. Actually, if we entered into a discussion in which we really sought to understand each other, we'd have to allow for the possibility that we would be affected, influenced by a point of view that is not our own and with which we think we disagree. That's a pretty good definition of a respectful discussion: one in which we place our own beliefs at risk, where we can't be sure that we will think the same thing afterwards as we did beforehand.

But there're so many ways of being disrespectful of each other. Look at humor: it's mostly disrespectful, aggressive, even hurtful.

When we enjoy hearing about that poor secretary who had trouble figuring out how to correct her mistakes, and ended up with patches of wite-out all over her computer monitor, we are laughing at her incompetence.

Last week I met a man in the parking lot outside my grocery store. He was distraught, frantic. He said, “Can you help me get into my car? It's running, but I locked my keys inside!” I told him I'd call Triple A, but that they usually take about an hour or so to come. He screamed, “So long? But my wife and children are trapped inside!”

This is another joke that's a bit less direct, but still firmly rooted in incompetence and humiliation: not only has this guy locked his keys in his car,

but neither he nor his family can figure out that they don't need the keys to open the doors from the inside.

We don't make jokes about physically handicapped or Polish people any more, but our culture fully supports the humiliation of the mentally challenged as an appropriate form of recreational contempt. There's another form of disrespect that finds common expression in Unitarian Universalist circles: religious ridicule. We may say that we're only teasing, but our jokes are often hurtful. In fact, if you'll reflect on it, teasing is usually a form of displaced aggression. We don't say, "nah, nah-nah, nah nah," but we do laugh at others' expense by the way we disagree with them.

Take the trunk fish wars, for example. Some Christians find the sign of the fish to be a sacred symbol. But lots of people who put these little chrome-plated fish on the back of their cars are also convinced that their religious beliefs are absolute truths and that everyone should be required to follow, even though they've been rejected by many Unitarian Universalists as outmoded or hurtful. Some of these shiny trunk fish have the Greek word for Jesus written in them. So we have the "light-hearted" response: a fish with four legs and the word, "Darwin" inside. There's a Christian response to this that shows a "Darwin" fish being eaten by a bigger fish with the word "truth" inside. There's another fish with four legs, one of which holds a wrench, with "evolve" written in it.

These trunk fish express a number of things: a religious conflict, a political debate, a series of humorous insults. But what underlies these "Darwin" and "evolution" fish cannot be denied: disrespect. This so-called humorous fish war is rooted in a violation of our principles. It is the desecration of a sacred symbol we are committed to respect even if we disagree with those who use it.

So, it doesn't look like Unitarian Universalists can do whatever they want. We have a set of affirmations, but they seem to limit our choice of actions. We can't try to prove each other wrong or make fun of other people's beliefs. If we're committed to respect and compassion in human relations, hating anyone for any reason is not an option.

When we embrace the right of conscience and the use of democratic process within our congregations and in society at large we agree to a number of

things. One is that all have the right to speak their moral convictions and to be listened to, even if it means listening to convictions that we don't share. Another thing is that we agree to abide by decisions with which we don't agree. We may continue to express our disagreement and invite others to change their positions, but as long as we are members of this religious community we abide by the will of the majority. The majority is also bound to respect dissenting views, but not necessarily to act on them.

Another thing to which we are committed is that we won't make any decisions concerning our congregations without discussion. Even if we are acting for the good of the community and we believe we are right, if we decide alone we are violating the role of the democratic process.

Here I'd like to introduce a definition of politics. Since many of us are critical if not cynical about the role of the political process in American life, we tend to think of politics as something that's inherently bad or corrupt. But politics is simply the expression of social power, and wherever there is a group, power is inescapable. In order to be a group, its members have to agree on something, and that agreement then has power over them.

Whenever two or more people come to an agreement on what's important, power has been negotiated. We don't usually think about it this way, but when you and a friend decide where to go for lunch, that decision then has power of both of you – you're committed to a course of action. The exercise of power can't be avoided, but the principles of justice and equity demand that differences in power be recognized, and that persuasion is an exercise of power. Fair negotiations take place through sharing and an increase in understanding in which all members have a voice. It's all right for the group to accept some things and to disagree about others, but we need to recognize that doing so is an act of political power.

Whenever a single individual or unauthorized group decides what's important for others, power has been seized. Seizing power is contrary to our democratic principle, and good motives are not an excuse. Noble ends do not justify undemocratic means. A commitment to democracy means a rejection of certain kinds of independence. (repeat) That's right. If we are to covenant as a

community, we have to behave as a community. There is no escape from the political process: decisions will be made – the only question is who will make them and how fairly. As Unitarian Universalists, we make our decisions democratically – through speaking and listening to each other.

Our principles describe a way of being together that transforms politics from coercion to cooperation. If we could truly live these principles in our daily lives, we would be empowered to live in a way radically different from that of our society – we'd be kind to each other. Although they are devoid of any specific religious content, I think that our principles can provide us with a powerful spiritual path that can lead to the transformation of individuals, our congregations, and the world. As ideals, they may represent unattainable goals – but that's what ideals are for. We don't condemn ourselves or each other for failing to live by them, but we just keep reminding ourselves to keep trying, one day – one principle – at a time.

Our principles begin and end with respect: for the worth and dignity of every person, and for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Between these two anchors we have an ethical framework for the realization of respect and mutuality everywhere. They can protect us and the world from the hurtful extremes of ideology, destructive passions and those competitions for esteem and survival that so often lead to argument, conflict, aggression, and war.

I believe that our principles offer what our whole society needs so badly: a basis for a civil society among peoples who do not share common beliefs or traditions. It's our opportunity and responsibility to learn to live by these guidelines, even though they're incredibly hard to follow.

We can make our congregations safe places where we can learn to listen to one another without anxiety and learn to speak to each other without aggression or defensiveness. This ability to live together in peace with justice and respect for all is exactly what the world needs today. Let's live our principles together and, together, we can transform our selves, our church, and our world.