

# **What Will We Stand For?**

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**September 15, 2003**

It has been my experience that if you want a brilliant conversation, you might ask a UU what does she or he believe? Mind you, such is not an idle query—if you do extend this sort of invitation, you'd best be prepared to invest a fair amount of time hearing the reply.

On the other hand, if you want to stump a UU, all you really do is ask, "And what do UUs believe in?" more often than not, the person's eyes will glaze over a bit and he/she will shift their weight nervously from foot to foot. Perhaps they will mention something about, "deeds, not creeds" or emphasize that we are open and inclusive. Mind you, even the 'professionals' can get tongue-tied.

There are several reasons why UUs—people who are usually quite gifted at language—fumble for words when it comes to talking about our faith. One is that we don't often stop to consider, let alone address, the basic assumptions that many people hold about religion.

How different this is from when most of us were young. Statistically, 80% of UUs come from a different faith tradition. As children, if and when we met people from different churches, we probably learned to express what our faith community as a whole held dear. Typically the Apostolic Creed or Bible was at the center; or perhaps we connected our life with something we perceived as ultimate—call it God, Jesus, or Salvation.

As we got older, we began to question the particulars of our faith. There's a process of weighing the 'truth' presented to us with our own insights and intuition. If we didn't reject those so-called 'truths' outright, we may have come to understand them as myths, provincial folklore and/or corruptions. So we begin to pick and choose what we will hold precious and what we will release. If you have ever participated in a Building Your Own Theology class you know, perhaps best of all, what are the sources of your own individual faith.

Still, old habits die hard. When someone asks us about what we, as a group believe, we revert sometimes to the notions of religion that we acquired when young. So we seek to explain our collective faith in terms of points of reference that we no longer subscribe to. And we, therefore, express our faith in terms of what we no longer believe in. We don't believe that Jesus was God, we don't believe that the Bible is literal, we don't believe in a heaven or hell.

We do this because negation is the main process by which most of us first arrived at this place and time. And this is a common attribute of Unitarians through the generations. UUs are, simply put, 'the Protestants.' Traditionally our forebears could more readily proclaim what they didn't believe in than assert what they did actually hold true. At the same time, many notable persons, like Emerson, were dissatisfied with that. It was Emerson, for example, who referred to the first generation of Boston Unitarianism as 'pale negations.'

It is also true that most religious liberals approach the basic path to faith in a fundamentally different manner than the orthodox. The difference was expressed during the Middle Ages thus: there

are those who must believe first so that they may understand the world; then, there are those who must understand the world first, that they may believe.

When talking about faith, I have found it useful to employ a distinction that John Dewey advocated in his early humanistic work, *A Common Faith*. In that work, Dewey suggested we ought to distinguish between 'religion' from 'a religion' from 'being religious'. Religion, he proposed, was a universal response to life—in particular a life laced with suffering. To better cope with life's passages, we devise various symbols, rituals and language. This he understood to be a common thread through history. In various places and times, certain symbols and rituals become dominant and specific creeds are devised—all religions evolve. Judaism, Catholicism, Methodist, Buddhism, etc. would be several examples. In any given specific traditional religion, there is a strong impulse to codify certain beliefs, to delineate between the saved and the unsaved, the sacred and the profane.

Finally, Dewey suggested that most traditional religions have lost their sway – mainly because they tend to take a stand on what passes for truth at one place and time and resist new insights. It has been claimed that religion is the storehouse of discarded sciences – there's much truth in that. So, science and religion are frequently perceived to be constantly at war with one another. Usually, if not always, it's the advocates of faith who attack or dismiss the fruits of science. Too often a religion embraces an outmoded notion too long and it becomes ridiculous, if not irrelevant.

To a certain extent religious liberalism is a different species of 'a religion'. Perhaps one of our greatest and most enduring features is that we employ a method to our beliefs that is closely akin to the scientific. It was no accident, for example, that William Ellery Channing chose the scriptural passage, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is true" as the basis for the first public affirmation of Unitarianism in 1819.

This process has been institutionalized in our movement; but it says a lot about human nature that some of the most daunting opponents of Unitarians through the generations have been fellow Unitarians. "The heresies of our youth", said Channing, "become the orthodoxies of our old age."

So it was that the first of our units broke away from their fire and brimstone brethren and declared themselves independent. This was actually a recognition that the orthodox had already begun to condemn and deny them fellowship. All the same that first generation maintained many of the customs, language and assumptions of the orthodox, though. The Bible was the word of God; Jesus was a unique manifestation of God's love; there was a divine plan unfolding in the universe and there surely was a heaven and hell.

As you sow, so shall you reap. That first generation unwittingly set in motion a process of exploration that soon began to undermine itself, even while they tried to organize and institutionalize their gains.

You have not doubt heard of the Transcendentalists—you probably first encountered them in high school English course. Were I to ask you to think of the names of five prominent American Unitarians, I would wager that most of you would include two Transcendentalists at least—Emerson and Thoreau being the most familiar.

The major contributions of the Transcendentalists were several. First, they challenged the assumptions about what sources of inspiration we might consider as relevant. Thus it was that they

began to study the Bhagavad-Gita, the Analects of Confucius, Upanishads and horrors of horrors, treat them with the same respect as the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. Worse, from an orthodox Unitarian point of view, they began to share those insights with their congregations.

Theirs was a radical approach and it distressed the older Unitarians. When Theodore Parker began to lead the Lord's Prayer, adapted with the words, "Our father/mother who are in heaven" and to suggest that the authority of Jesus could only be based on the actual validity of his teachings rather than on the basis of miracles claimed in the New Testament, the older Unitarians had heard enough—so they invited him to tea one day and politely invited him to resign from the ministry. But they had misjudged their man and he refused. It was then that it dawned on the Unitarians as a whole that they had no mechanism to excommunicate a heretic in their midst.

Ever since, there have been attempts to devise a creed that would be inclusive enough to embrace an ever-growing diversity of theological belief. One of the more famous examples stated that Unitarians accepted the Father or God, the leadership of Jesus and the brotherhood of man. (A later wag amended that list to include the neighborhood of Boston.)

Nonetheless, perhaps inevitable, each new generation brought new ideas and new sources for inspiration. And, since the fundamental basis of liberal religion is the primary part of a person's conscience, the movement continued to expand its theological frontiers.

This has almost always been unsettling — institutions inherently seek stability and so clashes have been continual and often tinged with anger and frustration. A classic response is to recoil from an innovation with a sense of dread—'we will be humiliated among the other religions if we allow this'. So it was that the first generation of Unitarians sought to drive out the Transcendentalists, or that later liberals sought to keep the theists away—or in their turn the later theists, the humanists, the humanists the new-age practitioners and the pagans.

Currently we are participants in a movement of unparalleled theological diversity. I once heard a UU minister opine, "Before 1960 we believed in nothing. Now we believe in everything". If true, then from a theological point of view, the heresy has been made irrelevant among us. No idea is too far fetched to be beyond the pale. And, I do believe that from an institutional point of view, the issue of theology is truly irrelevant now.

Let me emphasize institutionally—not individually.

Now, as I suggested earlier, one of the peculiarities of UUism is its ability to constantly reinvent and redefine itself. Not long ago, I heard some suggest that given all the religious strife in the world, we might aspire to become an intermediary among people of different faiths. I liken that aspiration to becoming a 'religious Esperanto' whereby we could act as mediators, talking a common talk with people whose views on God, salvation and scripture are in opposition with one another.

I think such an effort will largely fail because a believer's particular religion is more crucial to his or her than religion in general. 'Being religious' is unmistakably defined as being true to those particulars. God is in the details, as they say.

Nonetheless we aspire to great ideals. We subscribe, at least in our Purpose and Principles, to two lofty religious premises; namely that every person has inherent worth and dignity, and that all existence is interconnected.

The first premise is a restatement of the notion that all men and women are created equal. As practiced in society and in our congregations, there has been an expanding circle of inclusion. Historically in the United States, the proposition in the Declaration of Independence might well have read, all white men of property are created equal. Later white men, regardless of property, are created equal. Still later, all men—black or white—are at least, in theory, created equal. Then women were included. Currently the proposition might be understood to read all straight women and men are created equal.

Many of the advances in our society's understanding of equality and protection mirror what has happened in our congregations. I look forward to the day when, not only will we extend these assumptions to all citizens within our national borders, but to all citizens of humanity—when we regard intrinsically equal a Mexican immigrant equal with a Texan or an Iraq person equal with the Queen of England.

It's not going to be an easy task. We can and must, as a people of faith, be engaged in this process. Because, even if we have moved beyond theology as our central focus, we have embraced the notion of 'right relationship'. Unlike religions of old that identified the crux of a right relationship between an individual with the divine, we locate what Martin Buber called the 'I/thou' relationship between people themselves. This is not a novel idea. You can hear as much in Lao Tso's message that "if you want peace in the world, there must be peace: nations; peace nations: cities; peace cities: families; peace families, peace within oneself.

And this is why our separate religious journeys are so important. They not only tell us who we are and how we came to be, but also who we might yet become. Let us remember the prophet Isaiah, "Without vision, the people perish." we would aspire to achieve a world that, like in the words of St. Paul, recognize no distinction between "slave nor foreman; male or female; Gentile or Jew". But we have little choice but to champion the view that the guiding reason for such is rooted in our own humanity. There are those among us who are more circumspect and will subscribe to what Albert Schweitzer called "a reverence for life."

I know of one UU minister in Chicago who related how once some teenagers asked him about his faith and he launched into an elaborate, philosophical discourse. One young man, who knew that minister, cut him off and said to the others, "What he's trying to say is 'God is Love.'" The other teens approved— underscoring the truth that keeping it simple is often the best course.

I suppose, at one level, that is a fair summation of what UUs want to express about this faith. Of course, there are many who would balk at the use of the word 'God'. A more religiously humanistic view might be rendered, "Love is the ultimate good."

However we choose to express this notion, it is the great task in which we are engaged. We do not look for deliverance from a far removed deity; if salvation is to be found, it is more so a communal goal than individual. Whether we are privately satisfied that god is love or that love is the ultimate good, this is just the beginning of a life-long conversation. As mentioned before, God – or goodness – is in the details. Many of the 'rules' of 'right relationship' are still being defined. We may say, for example, as we do during the chalice lighting, that we wish to use our powers to heal and not to harm, to help and not to hinder. But has there ever been full agreement on what actions will heal or harm, will help or hinder? There are many great issues to be addressed in our day – how should we use our national resources?

Will we support gay and lesbian unions? What to do about the present war?. I don't have to remind you that already there are gaping divides as to what ought to be done. As religious liberals, it is in our best interests – and that of the world – to approach these issues with a religious response. Even in our own ranks, there is much internal work to be done. This is why congregations participate in such UUA sponsored workshops like The Journey Towards Wholeness or The Welcoming Congregation, and Our Whole Lives (to name a few).

If we no longer seek salvation in a classic sense, nonetheless we seek to transform ourselves, our communities, and our world. This is why we need to reframe our thoughts along the lives of what we stand for. To the extent that we travel together on this path, we further the blessings of creation for we the living and those who are yet to follow.