

From Creed to Covenant: Roots of Unitarian Universalism

Delivered at the [Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Harford County](#)

Rev. Lisa G. Ward

November 17, 2002

Reflection: Navigating Creeds

The most common question asked of any faith community is “What do you believe?” Most expect a formulaic answer, one that is easily recognizable and repeatable, one that would be the answer if you asked anyone of that faith anywhere. A creed. That is not, however, the kind of answer a Unitarian Universalist can give, nor one, I might add, that a Buddhist or Hindu or Taoist can give, so we’re not alone, really, in this communication gap.

One could give any number of answers, based on our seven principles. A Unitarian Universalist could reply: “God Is One,” which is the phrase chiseled on the walls of Transylvania Unitarian churches that remain standing from the sixteenth century. Or one could say “There is unity within infinite diversity,” as a transcendentalist might say, observing nature as the key toward understanding. Another Unitarian Universalist might say “We must all work together for a fair and free world,” much like our Unitarian and Universalist forebears might have said as they helped draft the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights in this country. Or one might say, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” honoring our Judeo-Christian heritage, and add, “You are the light of the world.”

All these and a multitude of other beliefs abide in Unitarian Universalism. How, then, can we communicate our faith to each other? How can we even claim a faith? The answer is in our lives, for we practice a living faith and agree that a religion should be fully lived, not simply believed. This is, of course, what early Christians believed, oh so many years ago.

Some 2002 years ago, or thereabouts, a child named Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in Palestine. From age 30 to 33, this Jewish man

taught a new way of approaching the Torah, seeing the Eternal One not as a jealous vengeful God but as a Loving, Beneficent Parent God summoning us to our own divinity. He was killed because he threatened the status quo and commanded such compelling personal power that those who would otherwise rule over the masses became afraid. The followers who survived Jesus witnessed to his extraordinary ministry and carried on his message as best as they could, by word of mouth, written testimony and letters, calling themselves various names until the label “Christian” stuck.

For three hundred years theological debates could be heard in small circles at any time, in the field, in the house, in the marketplace, outside the temple. Sometimes it was dangerous to wonder aloud and other times the gathered had secured a safe place. Who was this Jesus some name the Christ? Was he the Messiah of the Jews? Is he God? Who killed him and why? What does his gospel mean? How shall we carry out his mission?

There were no set rituals, no statement of belief, no standard of meeting. Christians endeavored to live their faith through service and study of Jesus’ ministry as they received it. They made their priority love of neighbor and of creation

and believed this was the way to enter into the Peaceable Realm which they thought would happen in their lifetime. As politics would have it, when Christianity became more popular and compelling to the masses, the Holy Roman Emperors saw opportunities for government. Enter Constantine, who believed in ruling by absolutism. By the time he became emperor, the debates about Jesus were heated, causing much strife and confusion amongst church leaders. So the Council of Nicea was called to order staging a debate of two main points of view:

1. Jesus, though different than humans, was made by God to walk amongst us and teach by the living of his life how we could all walk the way of the Peaceable Kingdom, and
2. Jesus was not made but actually a parcel of God, begotten from the Original Essence, not made.

For those of you familiar with the Nicene creed, “Begotten not made” won out. Christianity became the accepted religion of the Holy Roman Empire and all those believing other than the Nicene creed were deemed heretics.

Now the root of the word “heretic” means “to choose.” So, either you professed to the Nicene creed or you were a heretic, choosing to believe differently. And with the power of government behind this way of thinking, you could be killed, tortured, imprisoned, exiled or excommunicated for your choosing to believe differently. This marked a significant point in Christian history, because from this point forward, mainstream Christianity changed from a religion that valued first how you lived and treated one another to valuing first what you believed. Because of the mixing of church and state, it became far more important to know what to say rather than live what you believe.

Ironically, this change of emphasis weakened the Christian ministry, because people could profess a creed out of fear or expedience and yet not follow through on the precepts of the faith. Blur out what you have to say to get into the

door. Remember, Christianity was compelled to change, not because of a new prophet, but because of an Emperor trying to control his Empire. The authority that could be wielded by religious mandate was and remains powerful. Political leaders the world over, given that opportunity, could not resist it. We can witness its temptation in our government today with all the evil speak that’s rolling off tongues. This is the work of trying to win and control the soul of a nation toward a certain mandate—but that’s another sermon.

This is why the crusades and the Spanish Inquisition came to be. It was discovered that Jews and Moslems and some Christians would say one thing in public and practice a different faith in private. Paranoia set in, and, depending on the stability of a province’s leader, people were maimed, killed, homes burned, livelihoods destroyed because one could no longer believe what someone said and be in complete control.

As you’ve probably figured by now, our Unitarian and Universalist forebears were primarily Christians who were deemed heretics, ones who would argue the meanings of Jesus’ life and of creeds and practices. Some found pockets of civilization where there was relative freedom of speech, others spent much of their lives fleeing one inquisition or another, and some were killed, imprisoned, exiled or excommunicated.

The excesses of power caught up to the Catholic church—deemed the official Christian church—and by the sixteenth century there was enough fiscal and political corruption that Martin Luther’s protest of the excesses launched the Protestant Reformation, an explosion of ideas and ways to reform the Catholic church. Once that can of worms was open, scores of approaches to Christian life emerged. The push was to give religious authority back to the scriptures, not a ruler or priest, to see for oneself what the good news is. Our forebears were amongst the most liberal of reformers, including amongst other things, finding no evidence of the Trinity in the Bible. Instead they argued there is a Unity of God whose grace was available to everyone.

As you know, the word “liberal” comes from the root that means “freedom” (liberty). Liberal religious thinkers promote freedom of inquiry, the use of reason and intuition in garnering truth, and tolerance of differing beliefs, knowing that no one person or system has all the answers. Our forebears would end up in places where many cultures dwelled: the outskirts of the empire, places of international trade or places where protection of freedoms was part of the governing priority.

One such place was Transylvania; for a short period of time Unitarianism was one of the accepted religions. John Sigismund issued this edict of tolerance:

Toleration Edict

Act of Religious Tolerance and Freedom of Conscience, Transylvania, John Sigismund, 1568

“His Majesty... reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well, if not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching, for faith is the gift of God, this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.” [*The Epic of Unitarianism*, David Parke, pp. 19-20]

Reflection: Coming Home to Covenant

It became clear to our forebears that ascribing to a creed can lead to a kind of dogmatism that stops one’s religious growth and journey toward understanding. They realized that giving authority to a proscribed way of claiming belief

took the authority, and often responsibility, away from the individual. There was the need, though, to create a system that would honor the seeker, a system that could be found where ever one traveled.

Unitarian Universalism merged in 1961, soon to proclaim, through a democratic process that took several years, a covenant, an agreement to abide by a list of principles and to behave in a way that fosters a certain sensibility. It is an agreement on a way of regarding one another and on how to endeavor in religious community. It is based more on trust than control, inspired by the authority of respect and honor rather than rules and punishment.

A covenant is not a definition of a relationship; it is the framework for our relating. A covenant leaves room for chance and change, it is humble toward evolution. It claims: “I will abide with you in this common endeavor, be present as best as I can in our becoming.” This calls for a level of trust, courage and sacrifice that needs to be nurtured, renewed and affirmed on a regular basis.

The overall trust within this covenant is in the Truth (Capital “T”): something which no one person can fully see and something which each and every person can come to know—in glimpses, in another’s story, in epiphanies. Truth is ever changing in our seeking to understand because of our limited perspectives—we grow into a deeper sense of the meaning of all things when we take our journeys seriously, with full heart and mind. The courage within this covenant is in the acceptance and celebration of life, with all of its challenges, pain, ironies and joys. And the sacrifice within this covenant is in the letting go of dogma, of assumptions, of control and giving over to a greater wisdom which comes to us in bits and pieces. The task of this covenant is to take responsibility for the freedom we espouse. We know that we are interconnected and that what we do creates ripple effects of hope or despair, of affirmation or negation. What we do with and for one another is powerful and beyond our imagining.

We believe that new light is ever waiting to break through individual hearts and minds, a sacred knowing within that can inspire the ways of humankind. There have been extraordinary spiritual teachers throughout the ages and in many lands who can help us find our way if we but welcome their wisdom into our lives. We honor the religious questions people have struggled with in all times and places. We trust in the Source of All Life, known in many ways and given many names. We maintain that there is mutual strength in willing cooperation and that the bonds of love keep open the gates of freedom.

The common thread amongst Unitarian and Universalist pioneers was the transformation of a message of fear to a message of hope. “Faith, hope and love abide . . . let our hearts prepare them place.” In short, Universalism and Unitarianism reaffirmed a theology of blessing to bring out the healing and transformative power of love, rather than curse, which causes division, exclusivity and denial.

Unitarians and Universalists believed that the Kingdom of God described in the Bible could be realized on earth and that men and women were co-creators of that vision, given the gifts of reason, awareness, and fullness of heart and soul to achieve such harmony. It was the sacred work of humans to work responsibly toward that dream. “All that keeps the universe from nothingness,” wrote Rev. John Morgan, contemporary UU preacher, “is the heart of God and our own hands.”

Both Unitarians and Universalists believed in Christianity as the religion *of* Jesus, shared by Jesus, not a religion *about* Jesus, not idolatry of his life but continuation of his works. So, when embracing the spiritual discipline of the Sermon on the Mount, our forebears found the wisdom that all peoples were worthy of the love of the Creator and that this life had value. The next logical step was to see societal inequities as barriers to the sacred work of humanity.

Universalist Benjamin Rush, signer of the Declaration of Independence and principle author of the first organized Universalist faith statement

in 1790, became a forerunner of the abolitionist movement sixty years before the civil war: “We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race in a common savior,” he said, “and the obligations to mutual and universal love, which flow from that union, to hold any part of our fellow creatures in bondage.”

Although even Universalists were divided about the issue of slavery, as the influences of a racist society continue to infect us all, there was consensus enough in 1846, for 8,000 Universalists to pass an official anti-slavery memorial to go on public record in Akron, Ohio. They were the first denomination to be on record as abolitionist. Unitarians, as well, joined the fight, more individually than as a denomination, with such pioneers as Theodore Parker, famed for keeping a revolver on his desk as he wrote to protect the freed slaves he was housing. Unitarians and Universalists were powerful forerunners, as well, for the women’s movement, many of the suffragists were Unitarians. Other concerns remain constant amongst Unitarian Universalists: prison reform, public health, public schooling, labor relations, and concern for the aged.

Moral behavior will stick when we experience it to be the way to live our lives together—not when we are told that we are unworthy and must follow someone else’s rules. We will be ethical, compassionate and loving when we realize we are worthy of it, not when we are tyrannized by negativity, name calling, or coercion. That simply leads to lives that are less than our potentials and communities that function not out of their strength but to fend off fear—communities that work merely to survive and not to thrive. This all simply comes from honoring the spark of the divine in each of us. And this simple discipline is the most profound challenge we can face in our lives.

“Dare to love God without mediator or veil,” Unitarian preacher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his famous Divinity Address, “Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost—cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with deity... live with the privilege of the im-

measurable mind.”

Abiding in covenant is an art form. A mutual creation. It must be given and received. Offered, noticed and responded to. It is a leap of faith into the unknown, welcoming what may become of the encounter. It means moving beyond securing our own space into securing space enough for others. It means entering the relationship with the understanding of a mutual capacity to learn and to teach. It means an openness to what we do not know. To practice listening and teaching. To allow for awkward, even contentious moments of exploration and experimentation. It means regarding your neighbor as a gift and a challenge to your world, but knowing he or she is equally a part of it. It means, as well, protecting the shared vision by defying inappropriate behavior, taking action when violation has occurred and protecting the vulnerability of those striving to

reach the common endeavor. Being open and trusting is rarely easy—it is impossible if there are no boundaries. We honor each other by reminding ourselves of our best potential. This includes cautioning, defying, even at times protesting certain behaviors, especially when they—the behaviors—are destructive to the very fragile work of building and deepening covenant.

Do let your light shine—each of you. Believe in it, it’s there. Only you can douse the flame—you have it in you to bring it to its fullest life. And the glow that will occur when you do will encourage others to find theirs. Give yourself voice, you may be surprised by its wisdom. Hear another into speech, you may be surprised by that wisdom. And person by person, justice driven community by community, we will create a better world.

So may it be. Amen.

Copyright © 2002 Rev. Lisa G. Ward. All Rights Reserved.