

Credo I: What UUs Believe

No ray of sunshine is ever lost,
but the green which it awakens into existence needs time to sprout,
and it is not always granted for the sower to see the harvest.
All work that is worth anything is done in faith.

Albert Schweitzer (1875- 1965)
Musician, Theologian, Physician, Humanitarian

So here's a hypothetical situation: You're in the elevator or in the supermarket line or at the health club or at a PTA meeting or wherever you hang out, and you meet someone you've never seen before. You chat. Turns out she's new in the neighborhood, just moved in two streets down from you. She asks where you work, how long you've lived in the area, what you think of the local hardware store. Then she asks where you go to church.

You know what she means, and you decide not to quibble. (*Church* is one of the religious words that is a problem for some people in this congregation for good reason. So we call ourselves a congregation or a fellowship or a society.) But you don't want to get into all that, so you just say, "Oh, I go to the Fourth Unitarian Society in Mohegan Lake."

"Really?" she says. "So you're a Unitarian."

(You decide not to quibble about "Unitarian." The name of our religion is Unitarian Universalism for good reason, but never mind.)
"Yep."

"How interesting," she says. "I've always wondered, maybe you can tell me, what do Unitarians believe?"

"What do we believe? Well, in my congregation we believe a lot of different things."

"No kidding. How does that work?"

How *does* that work? Welcome to Credo I, the first of several services this year designed to help each of us explore that question. Today I'm going to sketch out some broad outlines for our study and suggest a couple of different ways for you to participate in future services about this topic. I'll also be asking for your input about an adult Religious Education class devoted to UU beliefs. We'll have mass signup opportunities later in the service.

I want to talk about two things: what we UUs have in common and where we diverge and blossom into many individual beliefs. Because so many of us are first-generation UUs who have converted from other religions, we can easily overlook the common core of Unitarian Universalism and only see our religious diversity. In fact, UUs believe many of the same things, and we also believe some different things.

Credo is a Latin word. It means “I believe.” A *creed*, from the same root, is a statement of belief. A *doctrine* is a religious teaching, as in the Buddhist doctrine that all life is suffering. *Dogma* is an authoritative religious belief. Same root as *dogmatic*. Articulating belief is a central function of religious institutions. Our beliefs define us as a people of faith and distinguish us from other religions.

Unitarian Universalism is a creedless religion. The UU bumper sticker says, “Many beliefs. One faith.” Unlike many other religions, Unitarian Universalism does not require us to subscribe to a particular statement of theological belief, such as the Apostles Creed. We do not claim to agree about or to adhere to any particular theological doctrine or dogma. You can identify yourself as a Christian or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Jew or an atheist or an agnostic and still be a Unitarian Universalist in good standing.

The bylaws of this congregation state, “No doctrinal test shall ever be made a condition of membership in the Society” (Article IV, Section B).

People used to say you can be a UU and believe anything you want to, but we know that’s not quite right. You cannot be an unrepentant racist and be a Unitarian Universalist. As people of faith we share common values and principles which guide and define us. Our First Principle says we affirm and promote “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” The Fourth Principle supports “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

When we talk about our beliefs, we are fulfilling the promise of our faith. As Unitarian Universalists, we have been given the gift of religious freedom, the opportunity to articulate and explore our beliefs, to engage each other in serious and respectful dialogue, and to help each other translate our beliefs into action, to affirm that what we believe affects the way we are in the world.

A few weeks ago, I was talking about the difference between a maverick and a heretic, and I said that every UU is a heretic because we affirm the individual’s freedom of belief. It might look easy for us to claim this title now. We’re all heretics.

I’ve since been reminded that many people suffered and died in the struggle to achieve this freedom. Let us never forget or overlook the sacrifice these heretics made so that we could enjoy religious freedom and religious tolerance today. And let us not take this freedom and tolerance for granted since in every age there are those who would enforce their narrow sectarianism on us all. We can wear *heretic* proudly and never forget what it cost.

So what are the doctrines or teachings of Unitarian Universalism? Our association of congregations, the UUA, is governed by a set of bylaws which include Article II: the Covenant. A covenant is a religious promise. This document is the source of the Principles and Purposes, which may also be found in the front of your hymnal. Article II is currently under revision, and I have included a copy of the proposed bylaws change in

your order of service today. Please notice that these bylaws govern, not individual UUs, but UU congregations.

This congregation is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and we have spoken earlier today about some of the gifts of that long association.

Staying focused now on belief, let's turn to the congregation's belief statements, those things that members of the Fourth Unitarian Society hold in common. In this fellowship, and in most other UU congregations, the people who gather on Sunday morning share an affirmation and a mission. Your affirmation, which we recite every Sunday, includes the promise to "seek the truth in love." Your mission statement combines statements about the congregation's identity, activity, and commitment, including the intention to "support open-minded spiritual exploration." Along with the bylaws that govern the society, these are the defining belief statements of this congregation.

Remember the new neighbor who asked you at the beginning of this sermon what UUs believe? You could answer her by giving her a little card with the Principles and Sources, and you could tell her about the congregation's affirmation and mission. We agree about these UU doctrines, and they are at the core of what holds us together.

But we also identify strongly with the idea that people in this religious community don't all believe the same thing. We value diversity, including religious diversity. The individuals in this room hold many different beliefs about God, about the meaning of life, about the meaning of death, about human nature, and so on.

We have been blessed with a religious heritage that does not supply us with readymade answers to these questions. Our religion requires us to search for the answers, and it provides a community of faith to support us in the search. We are called as religious individuals to answer two questions: What do you believe? And how do your beliefs shape your life?

One purpose for our religious community is to provide a safe and nurturing place to each of us to grow our faith. If you still believe pretty much what you believed when you first came in here, you're not doing your job and the fellowship is not doing its job. Another core value of Unitarian Universalism is the conviction that revelation is not sealed, the expectation that each of us will continue to develop our faith throughout our lifespan.

Several years ago I invited the congregation to take a test that very roughly defines a person along the humanist—theist continuum. I've been urged to repeat this exercise, and we're going to take a few minutes now to take the same group of questions and answer them again.

[Administer Humanism 101 worksheet]

[Ask people to stand in a circle depending on their number.]

So you can see that there's a lot of diversity, a lot of difference of belief in this community of faith.

If you are brave enough to do so, tell the person standing right next to you one thing about your own personal beliefs. Now walk straight across the circle until you meet someone who's on the opposite end of the spectrum, and listen to that person tell you something about his/her beliefs. When you have done both the speaking and the listening, find your seat again.

Sharing differences takes courage. Honest sharing is nurtured in an atmosphere of mutual respect where both people are curious about what the other is trying to say, and neither person is trying to change the other's mind. We do not have to think alike to love alike.

As we begin to share more of our personal belief systems, we could use a framework that's more sophisticated than the humanism—theism dichotomy suggested by the worksheet you just filled out. The worksheet is organized around some questions that differentiate believers from nonbelievers in very general terms, so it's a useful first step but there's lots more to talk about.

My colleague, Charlie Ortman, the senior minister at the Unitarian Church of Montclair, New Jersey, has developed a class for theological sharing. It's called "Five Questions: A Theological Process for Discovery and Growth." Charlie meets with groups of five to seven participants for six separate evenings to talk about five broad areas of belief: Ontology (What does it mean to be human?), Epistemology (How do I know what I know?), Cosmology (Who or what is in charge?), Soteriology (What is the purpose of my life?), and Eschatology (What is the meaning of death?

If I were teaching a class like that, I would add two more: Ecclesiology (What is the purpose of the congregation?) and Ethics (How do I know what is good?).

Whenever we talk about our personal beliefs, it's helpful to remember where we have come from because our religious heritage continues to influence us. Our beliefs about fundamental things are much more than rational constructs. They're colored by the people we have known and the experiences we have had throughout our lives. So whenever I start a conversation with someone about their beliefs, I always ask about their childhood experiences with religion in their families and about who they see as their religious ancestors.

Finally, I believe that what we believe matters. I look forward to continuing the conversation about belief with you in the months to come.

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 For the 4th Unitarian Society
 In Mohegan Lake, New York
 October 19, 2008