

Our Beliefs by David Rankin

(Note: David Rankin, a Unitarian Universalist minister, grew up as a Methodist. This piece explores some of his religious journey.)

*I believe in God the Father,
And in Christ Jesus, His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was buried,
And the third day rose from the dead,
Who ascended into heaven,
And sitteth on the right hand of the Father,
Whence He cometh to judge the living and the dead,
And in the Holy Ghost - the Holy Catholic Church,
The remission of sins - the resurrection of the flesh,
And life everlasting. Amen.*

This is the Apostles' Creed, written in the year 340 C.E. It is a creed millions of Protestants and Roman Catholics still recite on Sunday morning, and that I, myself, recited for fifteen years in a Methodist church in Pennsylvania.

But, there came a time in my life when I could no longer believe in the creed. The words stuck in my throat, my tongue tied with doubt. Questions welled up in me about the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Catholic Church. I was filled with doubt about the resurrection, the final judgment, and promises of life everlasting.

My silent rebellion rose as I felt my acceptance of the church creeds ebbing. Within myself, I was beginning to refuse to conform.

It became impossible for me to obediently repeat words I no longer believed; to pray; to sing hymns. In the end I was unable to attend church at all.

I turned against the religion of my youth with a vengeance. The church was an aged relic, mired in its own hypocrisy. The religion itself was weak, remote, and irrelevant. The minister droned on in ignorance of the world around him. To me, it seemed there was a clear choice to be bound or to be free. I chose to be free.

I abandoned the church for nine years. My friends and I joked with amused condescension over drinks; we had been that route. We were young, well educated, and independent. What use was church or religion? I could think for myself.

There was an odyssey of return. Slowly, with difficulty, I did come back. The journey, born out of strange longing, was often jagged and random.

Out of the emptiness and despair of the secular world;
Out of the hunger and the thirst for the meaning of life;
Out of the weariness and the boredom of daily routine;
Out of the desire and the need to relate to community;
Out of the wonder and the mystery of my own existence;

I did return to find a religious community. Eventually, I became a minister myself.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister, I speak to many people who are former Methodists, Catholics, and Presbyterians; former Jews, Mormons, and Congregationalists; former Anglicans, Baptists, and Lutherans. I ask that they remember the words of T. S. Eliot from "The Dry Salvages":

There is no end, but addition: the trailing
Consequence of further days and hours,
While emotion takes to itself the emotionless
Years of living among the breakage
Of what was believed in as the most reliable—
And therefore the fittest for renunciation.

I want them not to let negative feelings from the past dominate their newly found religious lives. It is only by cherishing and respecting our earliest experiences of community religion that we can integrate them with Unitarian Universalism.

It is commonly charged that the Unitarian Universalist churches have become a haven for people who cannot quite make up their minds.

One wit has written that a Unitarian Universalist is a person who walks the thin line between confusion and indecision.

Another has written that if you are a Unitarian Universalist, bigots bum a question mark on your lawn.

It is true that ours is a free, tolerant, and creedless church. There is acceptance of people from all traditions and backgrounds — with no theological dogmas, with no intellectual restraints, with no prohibition on religious expression. But, that's not where it ends. It is important that a person accepts his or her own past and accepts any negative feelings that go with it; this is the first step. But beyond finding peaceful closure with what has been, people joining the Unitarian Universalists need to build a new and positive commitment to religion.

There are ways in which we are similar to other religions. Like the Roman Catholics, we have a long tradition extending over many parts of the world from India to Hungary to the Americas. Like the Jews, we have our heroes and heroines: Servetus, David, and Fuller; Murray, Channing, and Emerson; Barton, Anthony, Steinmetz, and many others. We have a system of democratic polity, like the Baptists, with the congregation acting as the ultimate authority. There is an elected Board of Trustees, and a pulpit characterized by freedom of expression.

As with the Confucianists, we have emphasized reason, wisdom, and knowledge. We have an eclectic system of theology, like the Hindus, which encourages each individual to develop a personal faith that is not dependent on the demands of an institution. Like humanists, we have our roots in the experience of the world as it is known through touch, sight, sound, taste, and smell. Like Buddhists, we accent the beauty, mystery, and holiness of every man, woman, and child, seeing each as a sacred vessel.

The similarities of belief are not an accident of history. Rather, they spring from the receptivity of Unitarian Universalism to the surrounding culture. While our roots are deep in the Christian tradition, they also extend to the Greek philosophers, the Hebrew prophets, the Renaissance thinkers, the mystics of the East, and the secular thinkers of the modern world.

Although there are many similarities between Unitarian Universalism and other religions, there are also differences. Robert L'H. Miller, Professor of Religion at Tufts University, sought to discover whether there is a value system in Unitarian Universalism that differs distinctly from that of Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and secularism. He conducted a scientific survey and described his results in, "The Religious Value System of Unitarian Universalists." He concluded that there was, in fact, a distinctive composition of values. Unitarian Universalists placed self-respect, wisdom, inner harmony, mature love, a world of beauty, and an exciting life much higher than did people in other religious groups. The values of social recognition, pleasure, a comfortable life, family security, and salvation were ranked lower. Indeed, salvation came close to being a disvalue, ranking consistently as the lowest of eighteen selections. (It was first among orthodox Christians.)

It was found that of instrumental values, Unitarian Universalists place lovingness, independence, intellectualism, imagination, and logic much higher than did people of other religious groups. The values of obedience, cleanliness, politeness, self-control, and forgiveness were ranked lower. (Indeed, the disdain for obedience and politeness goes far toward explaining the occasional chaos of our meetings together.) It is good that we are loving.

It can be said, then, that people who choose to be part of a Unitarian Universalist church do have a special pattern of values. These people can best be described as self-actualizing, intellectual, independent, ethically committed, and this-worldly. In the language of Miller's article:

...the data support the conclusion that being a Unitarian Universalist is characterized by holding a constellation of values which differentiates such persons from other kinds of religious communities and, at the same time, develops an internal sense of commonality and a homogeneous community. (*Review of Religious Research*, 17:3, Spring, 1976, 207-08).

In other words, there are ways to seek religious fulfillment, handle joy and sorrow, search for profound and satisfying relationships, wonder at the place of human destiny in the wider scheme of things, and find mature self-awareness that are particular to Unitarian Universalism.

One of the themes of the 400 years of Unitarian Universalist history has been to preserve and extend a pattern of values which is genuinely our own — not merely the remains and borrowings of other religions. Unlike the orthodox, with their emphasis on obedience and authority, we believe in freedom and independence. And unlike the Fundamentalists, with their emphasis on self-denial and surrender, we believe in self-fulfillment and affirmation. We are not like the Witnesses, who emphasize death and salvation. We believe in life and beauty. And we are not like the Mormons, who emphasize security and prosperity. We believe in risk and excitement. Finally, we differ from the New Age religions, with their emphasis on serenity and adjustment. We believe in an inner harmony that will lead to ethical action.

Usually it is very difficult for the newcomer to understand our approach to the religious life. I have seen many people outwardly reject the tenets of an orthodox religion, but still cling to them unconsciously. It takes time and patience to educate people in the ways of Unitarian Universalism, and encourage them gradually to adopt a new system of beliefs.

It is important to understand the traditional religious themes in order to approach an entire understanding of the Unitarian Universalist faith. We cherish diversity of belief as an institution; we call for commitment as individuals.

- *On God:* There is acceptance of agnosticism, humanism, even atheism; there is also an understanding that belief in God can be manifested in many ways — from an idea of a “personal God” to an idea of God as an “Ultimate Reality.”
- *On Jesus:* There is a belief in the Galilean as the highest model of the religious life. At the same time, there is an interpretation of Jesus that equates his ministry with that of Moses, Buddha, Socrates, and Mohammed.
- *On Scripture:* There is belief in the Bible as especially unique and inspired. There is also a belief that every revelation of truth in every era of human history should be highly revered and esteemed.
- *On Human Nature:* There is a belief in the devastating power of evil; and a belief that all people can do good if their innate capacity for goodness is well nurtured and guided.
- *On Immortality:* There is a belief that death brings the absolute cessation of mind and body. There is also a belief in other numerous possibilities — from the immortality of the soul to the Hindu concept of reincarnation.

Unitarian Universalism is a great disappointment for those who desire a creedal statement on the traditional themes of religion, or feel that everyone in a church should hold the same theological views. For those who feel the need to build their own personal theology, without the constraints of an institutional formula or the authority of an ecclesiastical hierarchy, Unitarian Universalism is an exciting adventure.

There is a peculiar genius to the eclecticism of the Unitarian Universalist faith, which lies, I think, in its recognition that religion is not an isolated incident or event, but is the expression of a single human spirit’s relationship to the world in the search for meaning and the joy of discovery.

Religion is singing, dancing, praying;
Religion is reason, emotion, longing;
Religion is dreaming, playing, creating;
Religion is biology, morality, politics.

Faith is a well from which insight and courage can be drawn to confront the problems of life. A religion that dealt only with intellectual abstraction would not answer this human need. In the end, the only relevant and essential test of a religion is how it teaches us to act in response to the hardest challenges before us; to face grief, despair, tragedy. Unitarian Universalism is connected, at its core, to actual experience; its essence does not lie in a distant and separate realm.

George Marshall writes in *Challenge of a Liberal Faith*:

One is free to believe what one's conscience, mind, experience, and emotions lead one to affirm. Our fellowship is founded upon the free-mind principle, and ours is an association that seeks to help a person develop the religion that is within each, rather than merely to give an external religion that can be put on like a suit of clothing. What can be put on can be taken off, and we feel too many people find they have no religion when the chips are down. What makes sense when we have background organ music or the filtered light of colored windows often escapes us when we are involved in the hustle and bustle of everyday life. Accordingly, if we can develop our own religion in terms of our beliefs, they can assist us in meeting the issues of life.

The following "Ten Points" provide a summary of the essential beliefs of Unitarian Universalists:

1. We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop a personal theology, and to openly present their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.
2. We believe in tolerance of religious ideas. The religions of every age and culture have something to teach those who listen.
3. We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.
4. We believe in the search for truth. With an open mind and heart, there is no end to the fruitful and exciting revelations that the human spirit can find.
5. We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge; religion and the world; the sacred and the secular.
6. We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice; no idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.
7. We believe in the ethical application of religion. Inner grace and faith finds completion in social and community involvement.
8. We believe in the force of love, that the governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which seeks to help and heal; never to hurt or destroy.

9. We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism, so that people might govern themselves.
10. We believe in the importance of a religious community. Peers confirm and validate experience, and provide a critical platform, as well as a network of mutual support.

I refer those who would like a short definition, for the purpose of explaining to friends and relatives, to a statement by Earl Morse Wilbur in our *Unitarian Heritage*: "Unitarian Universalism is a progressive movement toward perfect freedom of thought and speech in religion, within the context of a democratic religious community."

I would like to close with a personal word. The return to organized religion has been one of the most significant events of my life. I have found in the Unitarian Universalist faith a religion that suits my needs and temperament; that offers joy and hope in daily living; that provides an impetus for ethical commitment; that encourages a community of love and trust. It is good to be home.

I know now that I am also able to look back on the small Methodist church of my youth with a sense of gratitude. The people were tender and kind. The ministers were earnest and dedicated. The church was warm and friendly. Even the Apostles Creed, seen from a new perspective, has elements that are interesting and penetrating.

It's good to remember, with affection, my former home.