

Unitarian Universalism as a Postmodern Religion

Dr. Sheri Phillabaum

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I've often heard you should start out with a joke, so here goes: What do you get when you cross a Unitarian Universalist with a Jehovah's Witness? Answer: Someone who knocks on your door for no particular reason.

I think that's a funny joke, but I also feel some uneasiness when I hear it told, as when anyone hears a joke, however funny, told at one's own expense. The idea behind the joke is that Unitarian Universalists are, as I've heard it said, "A bunch of people who don't believe in anything." I guess the assumption behind that statement, made as a criticism, is that in order for a group of people, as a group, community, or church, to be said to believe in "something," they all must believe in the *same* thing. And to some extent I suppose that's true. There has to be some common thread that makes people feel it worthwhile to gather in the same place at the same time week after week, form a sense of community and group identity. And for a church, of course, that common thread comes in the form of the group's religion.

If you look at the dictionary definitions of religion and define a church as a community of like-minded believers, you might wonder if our Unitarian Universalist Church rightly deserves the name "church." Aren't we just a bunch of people who don't believe in anything? I'm a Unitarian Universalist humanist skeptic with Buddhist leanings who likes to celebrate the equinoxes & solstices. I asked for a Menorah for

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Christmas, but didn't get it. Is it possible to describe me, in religious terms, other than as a "flake"?

Maybe, but maybe we should look a little more closely at our assumptions about what a religion is; what a church is.

Mary Baker Eddy defined a church as "The Structure of Truth and Love."

If this is a good definition of church, and I think that it is, then Unitarian Universalism is, in my book, the best of religions and its church the best of churches.

Of the two, truth and love, I think that love is the most important; truth without love can be empty, sterile, even dangerous. You might remember Jonathan Swift's famous essay "A Modest Proposal," in which Swift used facts combined with unassailable logic to argue in favor of killing and eating children. Still, love without truth has some obvious drawbacks. Personally, I want my religion to be about truth as well as love.

To me, the one big, important, and, I believe, indisputable Truth with a capital T, when it comes to religion, is that no one knows the Truth with a capital T. It seems to me that in a world in which no one knows the absolute truth, a group of people coming together and all claiming to have access to one unassailable, all-encompassing truth, has to have a lot of falsehood embedded in its very fabric.

So now I'm going to say something that is going to sound very un-

Unitarian Universalist: Unitarian Universalism is the one true religion!

Unitarian Universalists tend to dislike statements like that because we

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know too well the pitfalls of believing that one's own religion is the one true religion. Pitfalls like Jihads and Crusades and Inquisitions. But when your one true religion has embedded in it an understanding that no one has a monopoly on truth, it becomes difficult to burn people at the stake for believing differently.

I would argue that UU truth is postmodern truth, a kind of truth that is not a fad but reflects our best current understandings of the nature of human existence in the world. In science, for instance, we're recognizing more and more that true objectivity is a fable. Phenomena are manipulated by the pure act of being observed. In the field of law, people are realizing that eye witness testimony, once believed to be the most convincing type of testimony in a courtroom, is very often worthless. It's not just religion where truth has proven elusive. In most areas of human endeavor, we're discovering that the more we learn, the more we realize we don't and perhaps never can know.

We Unitarian Universalists are often told to try to avoid defining our religion by what it is not, by what we don't believe. Instead, we should focus on what we do believe. Good advice. The only problem is that what we *do* believe can actually be pretty complex, and stands in contrast to a simplistic sort of truth that is easier to identify and define.

So here's the kind of truth UUs tend to reject: we reject the wholesale and unquestioning buying into of what postmodern terminology would call "the grand narratives" (vast structures of truths that have defined our culture, including the vicarious atonement of Jesus, Capitalism, Democracy, the

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primacy of the nuclear family, and a paternalistic patriarchal God who shepherds his chosen people through history). Unitarian Universalism, as well as postmodernism, recognizes these grand narratives as containing great and significant truths. We feel free, like Dave Matthews band and the Seattle Pacific architects, to take what is cool and to reject what, in the parlance of Larry Walls teenage daughter, sucks.

In discussing postmodernism, Larry Wall says that, “nowadays we've managed to liberate ourselves from the assumption of monoculturalism.” This has had the result that we're actually free to evaluate things (and people) on the basis of what's actually good and what's actually bad, rather than having to take someone's word for it. More than that, we're *required* to make individual choices, the assumption being that not everyone is going to agree, and that not everyone should be required to agree. However, in trade for losing our monoculturalism, we are now required to discuss things. Doesn't this sound like Unitarian Universalism, all the way down to the discussion? Some of you may know the joke in which it is claimed that UUs would prefer discussing heaven to actually being there, or maybe that for UUs, heaven IS the discussion. Maybe that's why UUs tend to be more into social justice and multiculturalism than adherents of many other denominations. We recognize that truth comes in many packages.

Postmodernists recognize that truth is multiform, various, changing, eclectic, syncretic. And so, I hope, do Unitarian Universalists.

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So now, aren't we back to UUs "don't believe in anything"? Let's go back to the idea of a postmodern computer program. That computer programming language, PERL, may be eclectic, pulling elements from lots of other languages, it may require a greater amount of active reasoning and input on the part of the user, but ultimately, the program written in PERL must run, must achieve its intended task. The developer of the first postmodern computer programming language, however freeform might be his methods, couldn't just grab a bunch of random code and throw it together. There had to be some underlying principle or set of principles, some order to the application of the language, so that not only would a program run, but that people would want to use it. In other words, there had to be some method to his discernment of what's cool and what sucks.

To put this in metaphorical terms, maybe UUs would be like the computer users, the computer would be the world we live in, and the postmodern code would be our way of living in the world, our common values and beliefs that make us not flakes, at least not necessarily and totally, so the program not only runs, but runs lovingly and with authenticity and practicality.

So, maybe instead of thinking about what's cool & what sucks, we should frame the question as "what works and what doesn't." Strangely enough, this question reminds me of the time (the one and only time) I visited a nudist camp. I could tell you about several things that struck me from that experience, but one of them was seeing a women there playing tennis. She was wearing a sports bra and socks and tennis shoes. Nothing

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else. How is a woman playing tennis at a nudist camp like a Unitarian Universalist? Well, it seems to me, that this was a woman who felt free to take what she needed, what worked for her, what was functional for the task at hand, and to forget the rest.

For Unitarian Universalists, what is the task at hand? I believe it's twofold: one, to continually search for what is true and right in life, to pursue, as the fourth of our seven principles states, a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning." And two, knowing that we will never know all truth and all meaning, to act on the truths we do find in order to live most authentically in the world.

Here are some other truths we Unitarian Universalists hold:

- 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;
- 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.

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We argue and discuss the ins and outs and ramifications of these principles. We debate whether Hitler had worth and dignity. We have varying opinions on how to achieve peace in the world community. Exactly how to bring these ideals to fruition will take us lifetimes to discover, if we ever do, but they are *our* ideals. In general, we believe that worshipping a person or book is more likely to lead us astray from these ideals than to lead us towards them. In general, we believe that worshipping on Saturday versus Sunday or celebrating Christmas versus Hanukkah or engaging in prayer versus meditation are mere details compared to humanity's real job of making this the best world we possibly can.

When it gets right down to it, I believe that Unitarian Universalists hold very strong common beliefs. The thing that throws people off is that our common beliefs do not tend to be theological even as the word "church" implies that we should be all about theology. Why should we all believe the same thing about God when the fact is that no one really knows if such a thing exists, much less his, her, or its exact nature.

For me, revelation was the discovery of a church where I would not be expected to worship only the same god as everyone else in the building. I can come here in my theological sports bra and tennis shoes, and it's O.K. Revelation for me was a church where the search for truth itself was honored. Basically, for me, revelation was finding *you*.

I think Unitarian Universalists are the mermaids of the religion world. Some of us may be a little flaky, but I promise you, we *do* exist.