

“What Kind of Religion is Unitarian Universalism?”

A Sermon by the Rev. Angela Herrera
UU Fellowship of San Miguel de Allende
June 30, 2019

This is my tenth year of ordained Unitarian Universalist ministry, my ninth year leading a congregation, and this was sixth I preached in a series of sermons on the world's religions back home in Albuquerque, and so it's probably about time I let everyone know that I'm not actually sure what "religion" means.

Now, don't worry... When I was a student at Harvard Divinity School, the Dean of the school, William Graham, told my class that he doesn't know either. Graham tells students that he has given up on defining "religion." He points out that in most of the world's languages there is really no equivalent for the category we have developed as religion in the "western world." And here I am conscious that what Graham is referring to is the dominant culture of the western world.

What dominant western thought calls religion might be called Dharma in one place, or compassion in another. "Deen" in Arabic is translated as "religion," but that really just means "the right way," and is more specific than the word "religion" in English. The problem is that Christianity has come to be characterized mainly as the acceptance of a set of beliefs, a creed, and this misguided reduction has been taken for granted to the point that western thinkers assume other religions are the same way. Accordingly, some folks have questioned whether Unitarian Universalism is or is not a religion. Peter Gomes raised this question in his preaching class, to the consternation of his UU students. But even some UU's have raised this question.

Obviously, there is more to religion than creeds.

I like the way Albert Einstein defined it when he was asked whether he believed in God. He said:

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion that stands at the cradle of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle. To sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is something that our minds cannot grasp, whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly: this is

religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I am a devoutly religious man.

This definition tends to resonate with many UUs.

Similarly, William Graham says another way to take a crack at the question is to say religion refers to the fact that **there is more to the world of experience than meets the eye**. Now you could take that to mean there is a spiritual world beyond the physical one. Or you could take it to refer to *meaning*. We make meaning out of life. Meaning is more than meets the eye, right? It's an interpretation of what meets the eye.

Meaning one of the primary tasks of religion. We take it very seriously in Unitarian Universalism, and so before we answer today's question, What is Unitarian Universalism, we've first affirmed the question. UU is a religion. You may have already thought that was obvious. Boy did I show you.

Meaning is one of the primary tasks of religion, wherever you go. And it doesn't depend upon whether you refer to mystery as a who, like Einstein did, or as a what, as you might if you are an atheist or an agnostic. This last point—that you may refer to mystery as a who or a what-- is particularly important to Unitarian Universalists. **Theological diversity is a hallmark of our denomination.**

In my congregation in Albuquerque, when we took an informal poll, we discovered that about 1/3 of us are atheists, humanists, or agnostics who don't have much use for [the idea of] 'god;' 1/3 of us are have fairly traditional ideas about a god, goddess, or spirit to whom one could pray and who is (at least sometimes) active in our lives; and about 1/3 of us use words like god and spirit to connote more abstract and natural processes in our universe such as evolution.

Unitarian Universalists don't have a creed to which new members must ascribe. We are a covenantal faith that believes, in words often attributed to the 16th century Unitarian Frances David, "We need not think alike, to love alike." The history of Unitarian Universalism is a story of people seeking meaning, just like the histories of other religions, and it's a living history, still unfolding in this moment.

If you are a Unitarian Universalist, I'll bet there have been times when someone—maybe a concerned relative—asked you just what kind of new church you're involved in, and by the way, they ask gingerly, would you say it's a cult? Or if that hasn't happened, I'll bet you've at least found yourself in the awkward position of trying to define this religion of yours. It's so much easier to say what we *aren't*,

right? We aren't creedal. We aren't fire and brimstone types. We aren't bent on saving people by converting them.

In fact, Unitarian Universalist history is sometimes told just in that way, with all of the significant moments characterized by what was rejected. The rejection of the trinity, damnation, blind faith. But we're more than that. So I'm going to give you a little history, and by the time we're done, you'll be well equipped for those conversations. Ready? Okay.

When I was an undergraduate student, I took a course in Western Thought and History, with a teacher named David Scott Arnold. He used to draw a big wavy line across all three panels of the chalkboard. On the far right side, he wrote: the present. He moved left across the line, adding significant events.

The enlightenment. The renaissance. Martin Luther and Protestantism. The dark ages. Early Christianity. The Axial Age, when Confucius, Buddha, Lao Tzu, Zarathustra, Plato, Socrates, and the prophets of the Hebrew bible all hit the world's stage within 600 years of each other, changing history forever. He'd be getting closer to the far left now, and on the very end, he'd write "prehistory."

Over on that left side, he said, we have story, but not history. It's the time of the Garden of Eden, of Abraham and Sarah and Moses and people living 200 years and Greek gods and other gods coming right down onto the earth to manage human affairs. It's the time of the Enuma Elish—the Babylonian creation story. And of the Epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian legend.

That's where Unitarian Universalism begins. Off to the left, right there in the swirl of the ancient search for meaning. Out of all that came the stories and practices and ways of making meaning that would intertwine with the story and teachings of Jesus and be passed down and reinterpreted by each generation. If you keep following the lines of thought and tradition—so many of them!--eventually a few of them twist together to form one strong thread: Unitarian Universalism. One of the natural evolutions of the thinking and tradition that began a very long time ago.

Most people are surprised to learn that in the first four hundred years after Jesus lived, there was an incredible amount of diversity. Each of his disciples heard him in their own way, and each carried his teachings forward with different angles. The stories about him that were eventually included in the biblical canon are, well, just the stories that were added to the canon. Many more were left out, some of which have been recovered and published in recent decades, like the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mary Magdalene.

Out of this milieu arose (sometimes by force) a dominant theology that involved the idea of the trinity and the existence of heaven and hell. These, of course, are the two points Unitarian Universalism contradicts *by its very name*. Unitarianism is the idea that **God, or our source, is one**. Universalism is a belief that all will be reconciled with that source. **Whatever hell there is, we create it or subject ourselves to it.**

You could stop there with the simplest definition of Unitarian Universalism: that all of life comes from one source, which some know as God, and that there is no hell except the ones we create or perceive.

Sometimes that definition is all you need for those conversations. But we've got ten more minutes, and I want to tell you more about those threads that spun together to form this strong thread.

The Rev. Jane Rzepka, one of my favorite preachers, has published a concise history, the outline of which I follow here.¹ We're going to hop along through 2000 years, as though on lily pads.

The first notable ancestor after Jesus is Origen, a famous third century theologian from Alexandria. When he was seventeen, he tried to become a martyr for Christianity, but his mother, who had given birth to him and rocked him when he was teething and dealt with his teenage hormone swings and fed him so he would grow up strong—and who was probably not thrilled that Origen's father had martyred himself—had no intention of throwing all this effort to the lions and so she hid all his clothing so he couldn't leave the house.

Stuck at home, Origen devoted his life to discovering Christian truth through the use of reason. And one of the things his reason led him to realize is that if God is good and is love, then no one is going to hell. So he became a Universalist. Our first Universalist ancestor.

About a century later, another Alexandrian scholar, Arius, promoted a *Unitarian* theology that said God is simple and Jesus was human. You would think this would catch on—Trinitarian theologies being so complicated to explain—but no. The trinitarians' efforts to counteract Arius were so effective, you can still hear the

¹ Rzepka, Jane. "Hold Onto Your Hats: All of Unitarian Universalist History in Just Under 2000 words." *Quest: The Church of the Larger Fellowship*. LXIII: 8. 1-3. Sept. 2008.

creeds they developed being recited in churches today. Some of you know this version:

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost...

That statement of belief was instituted to counteract Unitarianism. Whenever you hear it, think of us.

Then there was Pelagius, an English monk, also of the fourth century, who believed in **free will: the idea that humans have the wisdom and the power to choose between good and evil**. Sadly, he was overshadowed by his contemporary, Augustine, who cooked up the doctrine of original sin that says humans are essentially bad.

There we have the first three lily pads. These Unitarian universalist values: that all are from one source or one God, all are saved, and we have free will, though they did not become mainstream, are three strands that persisted over the centuries and occasionally flared up in the lives of other UU heroes.

One was Michael Servetus, another teenager, this one not as easily thwarted as Origen. During the Reformation, Servetus noticed, as others would, that Jesus never spells out the trinity in the gospels. At the age of nineteen he told both the Catholic and newly established Protestant authorities, "Your Trinity is a product of subtlety and madness. The gospel knows nothing of it." This was terrible timing—it was during the Inquisition. John Calvin had him burned at the stake.

In sixteenth century Poland, there was Faustus Socinus, a trusted, maybe charismatic, Unitarian, who attracted some of the greatest minds of that time with his liberal, Unitarian theology. But he also got the attention of the authorities, who snuffed out the Socinian controversy, as well as its instigator.

That same century in Transylvania, there was the Edict of Torda. Passed in 1598 by King John Sigismund, it was the first law of religious tolerance. It was this king's court preacher, Francis David, who said, "We need not think alike to love alike." There are still many Unitarian congregations in Transylvania today.

And now, as we watch these strands winding through history, we are getting closer to the present era. In eighteenth century England, Joseph Priestley, most famous as the scientist who discovered oxygen, was also a Unitarian minister.

A brilliant man, he inspired quite a bit of growth in Unitarianism in England then, which in turn inspired a mob to torch his home, library, and chapel. Narrowly escaping, he jumped on a ship to join his friend Thomas Jefferson in the newly formed United States. Jefferson, you may know, was also a Unitarian, and even produced his own version of the bible without any supernatural events.

And around the same time, one of my favorites, John Murray, also started out in England. Originally an evangelical Christian, Murray was converted by reason to Universalism, and took up preaching it to others. You know by now that this will not end well. Murray lost his church along with almost all of his friends. His wife and only child died. After a stint in debtors prison, the devastated Murray fled to America. He vowed never to speak of Universalism again, so thoroughly had it cursed his existence.

But as Murray tells the story, God had other plans. His ship got stuck in a sandbar off the coast of New Jersey. Murray wandered on shore and met a man by the name of Thomas Potter who believed he had been instructed by God to build a chapel in the middle of nowhere. and he had built it.

When he heard Murray had been a preacher in England, Potter felt certain Murray was the man God intended the chapel for. "The winds won't loose your ship until you preach," Potter told him. Remember, Murray had sworn off preaching. They left it to divine providence: if the winds had not changed by Sunday, Murray would preach. They didn't change, and he went on to become known as the grandfather of American Universalism.

Meanwhile, the Unitarians were doing their own thing, though they were not yet called Unitarians. Instead, there was a handful of free thinking congregational ministers in New England whose love of reason gradually led them to question literal interpretations of the Bible, as well as the Puritan's Calvinism.

Calvinists, you may know, believed in predestination: that God had already decided who was saved and who was damned. Since living an immoral life was a sure sign you were one of the damned, Calvinists tried to be good. Liberal ministers like William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, on the other hand, believed in free will.

Soon, Emerson grew too radical for the Unitarians of his time, until they refused to let him preach in his churches anymore. He'd become a transcendentalist, along with the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Bronson Alcott—father of Louisa May.

Transcendentalists found the divine through nature and direct experience more than through scripture. Eventually, other Unitarians also came to regard the Bible as just one sacred text among many— a widely misunderstood source of ancient wisdom but not literal authority— and we still feel that way today.

Christianity led to Unitarianism. Unitarianism led to Transcendentalism. And transcendentalism in turn, with its vague notions of the divine and its appreciation of nature, made way in our tradition for the humanist movement toward the end of the 19th century. Each of these changes was perceived as very radical when they happened.

Humanists attempted to reformulate liberal religion on completely rational, non-theistic grounds. This prompted other Unitarians to try to agree on a statement of belief, to reign in all this changing. A number of versions were suggested, many of which included God. Some ministers protested that without God or any shared belief, Unitarianism would cease to be a religion. But they didn't want a creed. They'd come too far in tolerance.

By the mid 20th century, around the time the Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged, a rational, atheistic humanism had come to dominate most Western UU congregations. The use of ritual faded away, there were no candles or prayers, and sermons were very intellectual. Churches were called congregations or fellowships. Reason and science were paramount, and the belief that humans were ultimately responsible for their own condition and the condition of the earth reinforced a strong commitment to social justice.

The social justice emphasis is gift from our humanist era that we should never forget. But from this period, we also learned that statements of disbelief can almost take on as much power as creeds. I remember, as a young person, knowing that— although I was raised UU and learned religious tolerance in Sunday school—use of the word God among adults in my church was frowned upon, and invited criticism.

Gradually, ritual was reintroduced. Women's groups had to do with that.

And several years ago there was a push to re-embrace "language of reverence." To bring poetry and metaphor, back into our religious services. And, to truly embrace

the diversity within our congregations, in which for some people, the direct experience of transcending mystery and wonder is a direct experience of God, while for others, it is a direct experience of life, of loveliness, of the Good.

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In her memoir, the musician and artist Patti Smith recalls one of her earliest memories, a walk in a park with her mother. The images, Smith says, are “vague... like impressions on glass plates.”² There is a boathouse, a bridge, the river and a wide lagoon. And she writes:

a long curving neck rose from a dress of plumage. “Swan” my mother said, sensing my excitement. It pattered the bright water, flapping its great wings, and lifted into the sky.

The word alone hardly attested to its magnificence nor conveyed the emotion it produced. The sight of it generated an urge I had no words for, a desire to speak of the swan, to say something of its whiteness, the explosive nature of its movement, and the slow beating of its wings...

Swan, I repeated, not entirely satisfied, and I felt a twinge, a curious yearning, imperceptible to passersby, my mother, the trees, or the clouds.

Unitarian Universalism is a response to awe and wonder. A way of organizing the endearing, tragic human yearning to name the feelings and the source of being, to put language to them as though if we succeeded we could finally take them into ourselves and grasp onto them and be one with them and be less at their whim.

We feel strongly that individuals are ultimate source of religious authority, not a text or minister—you are free to disagree with me! (Except on that point.) But we know individuals cannot be the only source. From our togetherness and our diversity, we develop spiritual humility. Not only that, in our diversity we reflect the world that we seek to understand. And most importantly, we believe the responsibility for healing that world belongs to us. No god is going to come down and fix things for us,

² Smith, Patti. Just Kids. Harper Collins: New York, 2010. (3)

or wipe the slate clean. If there is a God, that God acts through us. Loves through us. Heals through us.

Got all that? Ready to define Unitarian Universalism? No?

How about this:

Unitarian Universalism is a living tradition with ancient roots. We covenant to walk together, without a creed. And because each person is a sacred part of the web of life, we work for justice and care for the earth.

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Whoever you are, wherever you are on your spiritual journey, I am glad you are here. It is good to be together. Blessings on your spiritual life, and blessings on this congregation.