

## Freedom and Responsibility in a Creedless Church

When we speak of “God” or “the godhead” we are referring to something beyond words. After all, words can only represent a partitioning of reality, so the understanding of “God” as boundless can never be expressed in terms which are inherently bounded. So, in order to talk about “the Godhead” or “Ultimate Reality” we speak in parable or myth, presenting in concrete terms the mask of a wordless knowing. When the myth or symbolic representation of “Ultimate Reality” is useful, then that representation will become popular. But then, if the symbol is mistaken for the reality; that is, if the symbol is claimed to BE the reality; then we have dogma. A collection or set of dogmatic claims regarding the nature of reality is known as a creed.

Religions with a creed provide a set of answers to the fundamental religious questions, and require members to subscribe to the entire creed. Sometimes faith is invoked as a reason to believe. The wholesale submission of personal opinion to an established creed did not appeal to Thomas Jefferson, and probably does not appeal to most of you. Creeds kept me away from churches entirely, until I discovered the Unitarian Universalist Church.

The Unitarian Universalist Church is a creedless church. There is no system of beliefs concerning fundamental religious questions. Concerning the question of the existence of God, for example, UUs are either theistic, atheistic, humanistic, agnostic, or something else. I, myself, am a recapitulationist, and I'm welcome at the Unitarian Universalist Church. I know from personal experience that you can be a Jesus freak, an atheist, or both, and still be Unitarian Universalist.

We have no creed, but we do have principles and purposes. They are not a creed, not simply because wholesale submission to them is not required, but more importantly because they represent the conclusions we have reached from whatever starting point we used regarding fundamental religious beliefs.

We have no creed, but the fact that we can come to agreement on principles and purposes lends credence to our faith in the religious process, and not in the religious starting point.

We have no creed. As UUs we are free to believe what we want to believe. We are free to express our religious beliefs. We are free to seek and to find Truth. We are free to believe in ourselves and to trust our reason and our conscience. We are free to change our minds. We are free to agonize over religious questions and, like Ivan in the Brothers Karamazov, wish we could light a candle in simple faith. But we are also free to accept, conquer, or otherwise cope with the uncertainty posed by religious questions, and we are free to have faith if we wish, simple or otherwise. Each of us is free to confront the task described by Erich Fromm as, “... to orient and root [ourselves] in the world.”

I realized this freedom when I joined the Unitarian Universalist Church, and when people would ask, “What do Unitarian Universalists believe?” I would say, “We are free to believe what we choose to believe.” But now I realize that what UUs really “believe” is that we are responsible for our own religious beliefs. So now I answer: “We believe that we are responsible for our own

religious beliefs.”

I’m fascinated by how this change evolved. First I discovered that many Americans believe that people have a “fallen” nature, and that without the fear of God people will choose evil, and therefore allowing religious choice is irresponsible. Then I changed my wording to emphasize the responsibility of Unitarian Universalism. Then I had the paradigm shift of actually viewing responsibility as the true creedless church foundation.

So, we have no creed. But we do seem to have an agreement that reason and conscience are the true authority for religious belief, and that we are all endowed with those capabilities. Still, we can’t put that idea into creedal form, because of the catch-22. Any church creed that grants authority to individual reason and conscience must be discarded, because in order to grant authority you first have to claim it for yourself. So we put it as simply as possible: we have no creed. You have to figure out for yourself that “no creed” means individual responsibility.

The next question is, “For what are we responsible?” Well, we are responsible for conducting our own search for Truth. We are responsible to our community for the consequences of actions based on our beliefs, and we are responsible to ourselves for the consequences of actions inconsistent with our beliefs or the consequences of beliefs inconsistent with our reason and conscience. This is a significant responsibility. It requires each of us to confront the fundamental religious questions, formulate religious ideas, and continually question our religious beliefs. We are required to seek Truth, without taking anything for granted.

At one time or another, we must face alone the formation of our religious beliefs. It is a very important step, since religion provides our orientation to life, and the way we think about values, goals, life and death. It is more difficult to construct a viewpoint towards existence when one has to start at the very beginning, but it is worth the effort.

I believe there is a great deal of truth in the idea that responsibility is the basis for freedom.

The Odyssey House program for treating drug addiction manifests that truth. Dependence on a drug is replaced by dependence upon oneself, through a process in which responsibility and freedom are increased bit by bit, in tandem with one another, until the individual is responsible enough to return to the mainstream of society. An earned freedom.

In a similar way we UUs must earn our freedom. The tools we are to use are reason and conscience, and recognizing that we are all endowed with those powers, our Church accords us both the right and the responsibility to conduct our search for the Truth. It is not the Church that makes us free, it is the responsible search for Truth that makes us free.

Now, what’s it like to attend a service at a creedless church? This is where I talk about today’s Hymn. My objective was a hand-clapping, joyous, emotional song interwoven with words that talk about forming one’s own religious beliefs, thinking through personal values, and constantly questioning one’s ideas. These things are not usually couched in joyous terms, but these are the things that are the “stuff” of Unitarian Universalist services. We UUs tend to shy away from

emotional experiences at our Church services, but I don't think we should avoid them entirely.

The point I want to make, as it might be expressed in a Unitarian Universalist resolution, is: Whereas, we agree that having to find Truth on our own terms is our condition in life; and Whereas, when we express that perception we are expressing our perception of life; and Whereas, we recognize that our happiness or misery depends more upon our perceptions than our conditions; and Whereas, we are willing to accept that it is OK for our religion to help us be happy; and Whereas, it is evident that our happiness is enhanced by perceiving our condition joyously; Now Therefore Be It Resolved that we respond to our perceived task with joy.

However, there is another response to a creedless church, and that is the empty response to not having a comfortable, stable Creed upon which to structure and organize ideas. Most mainstream people can't understand how a church can do anything for you if it doesn't give you a creed to believe in. It's up to us to respond to that misgiving with support. One of the principles my experience confirms is that your powers to find, and to use, the keys to the kingdom of heaven are enhanced when you are given acceptance and love just the way you are. In other words, I believe in the power of love.

Part two:

As an example of how Unitarian Universalist freedom has enriched me, when I lived in Roanoke, VA my local UU congregation actively promoted the acceptance of diversity, and one of the activities was an exchange of visits with a local Pentecostal Church. I joined the diversity group for their Pentecostal visit, and I was so enriched that I returned many times to their Sunday evening service of praise. There are many reasons why I went back so often. The first one is that they knew that I disagreed with their basic beliefs, and yet before the service I was greeted with handshakes, and after the service I was given hugs and an invitation to return. In only two hours it felt like SUUSI.

The second reason I returned is that we agree on principles, even though we don't agree on creedal stuff. It's the principles that matter to me. We agree that thankfulness is next to godliness. We agree that love - not retribution, love - overcomes evil. We also agree that the purpose of faith is to give you strength, that spirit is more important than body, that your ability to cope with life is right there inside you, and that the main idea is to get to heaven (even though we have different ideas about heaven).

More importantly, I went many times because their service of praise brings to life, in an affective way, the attitude of acceptance and gratitude promoted by Alcoholics Anonymous, Norman Vincent Peale, and the Buddha; and their service of praise brings to life in an affective way the message of Jesus that love conquers evil. Now, when I say they bring this to life "in an affective way" I mean that when I experience the service I am emotionally charged with the feeling that gratitude and love are not only joyous, but also healthy for my soul.

But the most important reason I went is that it produced a transformation in me. The fundamental difference in our religious beliefs didn't matter. What mattered is how we are the

same. Their affirmation and acceptance of me, and the warmth they bestowed upon me let me see through our differences, and enabled me to see them as caring, loving people. I affirm them because I see them affirming the best of what I aspire to. When I see them I see right through their fundamental beliefs, and I see right through their black skin.

That's the transformation. The identity barrier of "other", which was residing in my subconscious and controlling my feelings, melted away. It is no longer "them." When we shake hands or hug it feels like "us." And I've noticed that the feeling of being one with other people is the feeling which is now evoked in me when I see another one of us who obviously is a pentecostal person or another one of us who obviously is a person of color.

I grew up in the Catholic Church, and when I was Catholic it was a sin to attend any church service other than a Catholic service. The Unitarian Universalist Church gave me the freedom to explore, and that has enriched my life. It's ironic that after abandoning the Catholic Church, I made a great discovery at a church with basically the same fundamental beliefs. As I see it, in the Catholic Church the main idea was the omnipotence of God. At the Abundant Grace Assembly the main idea was the love of Jesus.

Now, I do have a disclaimer. I was appalled one Sunday when the regular service was replaced by a meeting downstairs in the classroom in order to explain to the children that they would not be participating in Halloween activities because Halloween was a pagan holiday. And after hearing a sermon which condemned homosexuals as evil sinners I decided that if it ever happened again I'd walk out. As a UU I have the freedom to leave behind what I don't like, and take with me the things I do. Such as the day a man said, "I thank God for the difficulties He has placed before me, because it gives me a chance to overcome them." Hallelujah.

Part three:

If you look on the back of a dollar bill you will see the great seal of the United States depicted in two circles. In the circle on the left, at the top of the pyramid, you will see an eye. That is the eye of reason. It's on top of the pyramid, where it can see all viewpoints. It symbolizes the power of reason. Our democracy rests on the fundamental idea that all persons are endowed with the power of reason. Our Constitution encourages the free interchange of ideas because of a faith in the power of reason. Faith in the power of reason is what we mean by "In God We Trust." For those of us who believe that "God" refers specifically to a creator, "In God We Trust" means that we trust that God has given everyone the power of reason, and that we will govern ourselves wisely using that power.

Now, the Unitarian Universalist Church is the only church whose basic principle, faith in the power of reason, is identical to that founding principle of the United States Constitution. So let's spread the word: Unitarian Universalism is America's religion.

Thank you.

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