



**What do You Say After You Say, “I’m a
Unitarian Universalist”?
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UU Church West
Candidating Sermon
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READINGS

A couple of years ago I attended the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly in Cleveland, Ohio – which, as many of you know is the annual meeting of our wider association of congregations. This year General Assembly will be in Boston, and they are expecting a record-breaking turnout, since there are so many UUs within driving distance.

The Cleveland General Assembly also was very well attended – a record-breaking 4,400 UUs were there. For our first reading this morning, I’d like to tell you what was displayed on the big electronic sign at the Cleveland Convention Center. In golden flashing lights, it said: “WELCOME UNIVERSAL UNITERIANS”

Our second reading comes from the book “Born Again Unitarian Universalism,” an early book by Forrester Church, the longtime minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City. In the book, he recounts a dinner-party conversation.

Seated between strangers at the party, he is caught off guard when someone asks:

You are a what?
A Unitarian Universalist.”

“Oh, I see,” says the questioner, but obviously doesn’t. He is rescued by the woman on the right.
I’ve never really understood just what it is you Unitarian believe. You are Christians, aren’t you?”

“Not exactly. I mean, we were and some of us still are but most of us are not.”

“You don’t believe in Jesus?”

“Not in an orthodox way, certainly. Many of us value his teachings but few, if any of us, believe that he was resurrected on the third day or that he was God.

“What about immortality?”

“Well, I guess you’d have to say that we’re pretty much divided on that one.”

“But at least you all believe in God?” interrupts the man across the table.

“Not exactly. Many of us do, if each in his or her own way. Others of us do not find the concept of God a useful one.”

“What then do you believe?” the bewildered hostess politely asks.

SERMON

So there you are, like Forrester Church, sitting with people you don’t know very well at a friend’s dinner party, when all of a sudden one of them asks you “the” question. The religion question.

Or maybe it’s not at a dinner party, maybe you’re in line at the grocery store, and the checker notices a flaming chalice pin you’re wearing on your lapel, and asks about it. Or maybe it’s one of your child’s best friend’s parents who calls you on the phone one afternoon, wanting to know if you’re a Christian, and whether or not your kid can go to Bible camp next month with his kid. “Where do you go to church?” They ask.

“Unitarian Universalist? What’s that?”

What happens to you when someone asks you questions like these? Questions about where you go to church, or what you believe? Does your heart race? Does your stomach feel funny? Do you wish you could turn back time and avoid the whole thing? Or do you simply smile, and dive right in – telling all and sundry who ask who you are as a person of liberal religion, and what you believe. And why this church is so important in your life....

My fantasy is that after this morning, everyone here will have the words and the confidence to dive into the religion conversation. I know, I know, it’s a fantasy. But a minister can dream, can’t she? And, of course, my dream is based in what I have perceived about you all during this week that I have been with you: that you are an intelligent, articulate, committed and caring group of Unitarian Universalists!

But I know it’s not an easy conversation to have. I know, because like many of you, it’s a conversation I’ve had over and over as the years have gone by – including with my mother-in-law, who is a devout Christian, with my seatmate on the plane ride here a week ago Friday, with a woman in the pool at the hotel, and with a large group of relatives of a young couple I married in Seattle a few weeks ago.

It’s a conversation I also had recently as I was sitting in the optometrist’s examining room. I was there for a routine check-up, but my regular doctor wasn’t in that day, so one of her partners examined me. He looked at my chart, started poking around in my eyes, and then asked, suddenly, “So, I understand you’re a minister. What church are you with?” And we were off and running.

Unitarian Universalism is not a simple religion, is it? It's not one that lends itself well to the 30-second sound bite. Quite frankly, it's even hard to explain with a lengthy, seven-course sound meal! And yet I think it is very important for us to tell people what we are doing here together.

It's important for us to tell others about Unitarian Universalism because someone told us. Someone gave us the gift of this liberal religious way of being. Psychologist of religion Louis Smedes says that if a gift stops being given, if it stops moving, it ceases to be a gift and becomes a curse. Having been given the gift and the opportunity that Unitarian Universalism is, we have a responsibility to keep the gift moving. To give it to others. To keep it alive.

It's also important for us to tell others because this church and our way of being religious, do not exist without our living them. Without people to create it, there is no Unitarian Universalism.

And it's important for us to tell others because doing so will help us grow spiritually. It's a risk, of course, because letting someone know who you really are and what you believe in and value is always a risk. But without taking risks, we do not grow.

So, let's say you agree with me that it is important for us to tell people about this church and about Unitarian Universalism. But what should we say?

The rev. Dr. John Buehrens, a past president of our UU Association said this: "Unitarian Universalism offers a clear alternative – supporting the worth and dignity of every individual, respecting the rights of conscience, promoting the practice of authentic democracy, and recognizing our

interdependence with all that exists. We do not have a required formula of belief. Instead, we embody a reverent, respectful religious pluralism..."

Well. That's a nice answer, right? But you know what? It also sounds like "UU speak" to me. Too much insider language. The average person you meet on the street in Wauwatosa or Brookfield or New Berlin or Milwaukee or Elm Grove or Waukesha or West Allis isn't going to be satisfied if you say that, especially if you have to pull a "cheat sheet" out of your pocket to even get that far.

What people really want to know, when they ask you where you go to church or what you believe are the answers to these seven most-commonly-asked questions:

1. Do you believe in God?
 2. Do you believe in the Bible
 3. Are you Christian? This question might also be "Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?" depending on the religious stand of the questioner...
 4. Do you believe in the afterlife, or immortality?
 5. Do you pray?
 6. What do you teach your children?
 7. and finally, What are your church services like?
- (Rev. Steve Edington of the UU Church of Nashua, NH says these are the most commonly-asked questions. He's co-author with John Sias of the booklet, "One Hundred Questions Non-Members ask About Unitarian Universalism," available through the UUA Bookstore.)

Here's the sort of thing I try to say when somebody asks me about our faith:

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religion that has as one of its most cherished values a belief that there is a basic goodness at the heart of every person. It grew up and out of liberal New England congregational Christianity, but over the years has grown to be open to wisdom not only from the Bible, but from the world's religious traditions, the sciences, the arts, and many other sources, and thus it's no longer considered a strictly Christian faith.

We believe that people have the right and the responsibility to shape what they believe about God, Jesus, life after death, the meaning of life, and how to be a good person. We encourage them to use their intelligence, their intuition, their life experiences to shape their beliefs, knowing that what they believe will change as they grow and change. Some people believe in God or a divine force of some kind, and some don't.

Honoring this diversity of belief, we come together as one community each week to honor the religious ideas we hold in an atmosphere of trust and caring. We also come together to help our children learn this liberal religious approach, and to work for human rights and social justice. We work for the preservation of our planet, too, for we know we are interdependent with all life on earth. And one other important thing about is that our congregations are organized democratically because we believe people should have a voice in the things most important to them.

Now, that's a pretty long answer – and it doesn't even begin to address the questions about prayer or worship services! And it doesn't speak, except obliquely, about our larger denomination's commitment to anti-racism or to honoring, celebrating and advocating for the lives of people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender – who are excluded or oppressed by most churches.

But it does accomplish one important thing, and that is to talk about who we are in positive terms, instead of talking about what we're not. Some of us are familiar, no doubt, with the negative approach, where we declare that we have no creed, no dogma, no doctrines, no scripture, no this and no that...

Sometimes this is the easiest thing to do when someone is coming at you with their firm or even passionately held beliefs – to say, no, not that, not that, not that. But I've come to believe that even if it's trickier, it's very helpful for us to define ourselves positively, to speak confidently about what we hold dear, and our place within our liberal religious tradition.

I also believe that the best way to tell people about Unitarian Universalism is to speak from our personal experiences – after all, our personal right and responsibility to grow and deepen is at the core of our faith! When someone asks you about your church, remember what it was about your first visit to this, or another UU congregation that made you decide to go back a second time. What was it that intrigued you? What delighted you? What challenged you, or comforted you? A deeply meaningful spiritual life has to be a matter of personal choice and continuing effort, so why not talk about why you made that choice, and are making that effort?

There's something really critical here. The way we talk about our religion – our attitude, our confidence, our warmth, our respectfulness, our authenticity – these things are as important if not more so than the content of what we say.

I realize that this may sound like blasphemy in a religion that puts such a high value on the human ability to think, to reason, and to discern what is personally important as well as

contributing to the truths we hold in common. But it isn't blasphemy.

Think about it. The person who is asking you about Unitarian Universalism probably has one of several reasons for doing so:

1. They are interested in religion, because they are feeling the need for something spiritual, or for a caring community in their own lives. But they have never heard of us.
2. The same as number one – the person has needs – and they may have heard something about us that sounded good, and they want to know more.
3. Again, the same as number one – but this time they are asking because they've heard something about us that sounded not so good, and they want to know if we're really a cult, or wacky, or something like that.
4. And the fourth reason could be that they are asking you about your religion because they have strong religious convictions of their own, and what to share them with you.

It's usually pretty easy to tell after the first couple of question someone asks if they are an interested listener or not. Someone who is hoping to find a religious community that they might become part of will almost lead you along through the conversation – they're practically begging you to invite them to come to a Sunday service.

And if the person who's querying you holds beliefs that are very different from yours – relax! If they are convinced that the Bible is the one and only authoritative word of God, or that without Jesus as Lord and Savior we're all going to burn in hell, well, it's highly unlikely that you're going to change their mind.

Sometimes when I am in conversation with folks like this it feels like we are speaking completely different languages. Last Sunday, when I met with some of the members of the Anonymous group – this congregation's youth group – they told me a story of how one Sunday a couple of Lutheran youth showed up in their group, and challenged the UU youths rather aggressively about not believing in Jesus the same way they did. I was impressed with what the Anonymous group members said. It seemed that even though the visiting youths would not listen to them as they tried to explain what they believed, and were not being respectful, that the UU youths tried very hard to be respectful of their visitors and their beliefs.

I've learned, when I am in conversation with people whose beliefs are vastly different from mine, to stop trying to get them to listen to me, and to stop trying to prove myself right by pointing out the logical flaws in their arguments, or referring to the latest Biblical archeology research. I'm simply warm and respectful, and affirm that they and I have different beliefs. For even if there's no room in their world for religious diversity, there's certainly room for it in mine! Religious diversity, like diversity of all kinds is inherently enriching! And then I usually ask them, "What it is you really love about your church?"

But let me go back to those seven questions that people often ask.

First of all, we have to remember that people are being very concrete and literal when they ask these questions. They don't want us to sidestep them or give them a metaphor. They want a real answer that they can understand and compare with their own experiences, beliefs, and unnamable longings....

So let's speak plainly. The first question was do you, or do Unitarian Universalists believe in God?

The truth is that there isn't one unified UU belief about God – or about any of the other traditional Christian beliefs like life after death, or about practices like prayer. The easiest thing to tell someone is that UUs hold their beliefs as individuals, because we believe in each person's power to figure out for themselves what is most true and right.

But don't stop there. You might also say that most people who come to UU churches really are seeking something deeper and more meaningful, something that might be called “a reality greater than ourselves.” But most of us don't see that reality as a supernatural supreme being or a personal God who listens to prayers or micromanages the universe. Many of us come to Unitarian Universalism having rejected the ideas about God that we were raised with, or come to it having had no religious background, but we're still seeking some experience of what might best be called the holy or the sacred – some sense of connection with what theologian Paul Tillich called the “depth dimension” of life.

But you don't have to stop there, either. When someone ask you if UUs believe in God, go ahead and tell them what you believe!

The second commonly-asked question was “do you believe in the Bible?” That's an easy one. Here's the answer. “UUs view the Bible as one source of religious wisdom, as a human creation that reflects the perspectives of its many authors and the times in which they were writing. We respect the Bible along with many other sources of wisdom, like the scriptures of other world religions, the words of philosophers and poets, the

findings of science, and the seasons of the natural world.” You can quote me on that one!

What about the question, “are Unitarian Universalists Christian?” Again, this is easy to answer. Our historical roots are in liberal Protestant Christianity, though many of our ideas have been around for centuries longer. Over the past century and a half we're moved away from our Christian base to become a freer faith. Even so, about 20 percent of today's UUs call themselves Christians, meaning that the person of Jesus, the example of his life and teachings, are the central focus of their faith. (20% statistic comes from Steve Edington)

If someone asks you if UUs pray, you can tell them, again, that some of us do and some of us don't. Personally I pray all the time, even though I am certain that my God is not “the big ear in the sky” waiting to be filled with my words of supplication of propitiation. It's simply that I find prayer to be a highly useful spiritual practice – one that takes me out of self-centeredness, helps me reach out and know I am not alone in my sorrows or confusion or gratitude, and helps me feel more connected with the larger Life I believe all of us are a part of. As many before me have said, “It isn't that prayer changes things. But praying changes people, and people change things.”

What do we UUs teach our children about religion? Our religious education programs are designed to give our kids and youth a sense of UU identity by teaching them about our heritage and our practices. We try to help them appreciate our Christian roots, and the Jewish roots of Christianity, and to understand how those religions and others in the world deal with the great questions of existence. We encourage them to respect themselves and one another, and our good planet earth. We help them know that they can make a difference in the

world – not only by being good people, but also by working for equity, justice and compassion for all. You can quote me on that one, too!

So, I wonder if you are wondering if I said all of this to the eye doctor the other day as he was poking around in my eyes.

And you know what? I know I didn't say all of it. But you'd be surprised how much you can say in just a few minutes when someone is really listening. And he was listening.

I also listened to him, and he spoke of the different religious backgrounds he and his wife came from, and how they hoped to find a church that would work for both of them. From what he said, it seemed to me that they would find solace and encouragement from my current church and from Unitarian Universalism, and I invited him to come on Sunday – any Sunday he chose. I also gave him the church website address, and encouraged him to take a look, and offered to send him a copy of the current newsletter.

I haven't seen him yet – but who knows, maybe he's there today! And even if he and his wife never do make it to church, I'm still glad he asked me about my religion. Because every time I talk with someone about Unitarian Universalism, I come away appreciating it even more.

So the next time somebody asks you the religion question, dive right in. Be honored and proud to tell them who you are and what you believe. Think of it as a spiritual practice – an exercise in articulating and deepening your faith and growing your soul in the process. And don't be afraid to invite them to church – for as you probably know from your own experience, it's the best way to find out what Unitarian Universalism really is. And you never know what might happen – for as my

colleague the Rev. Ricky Hoyt likes to say, “For more than 200 years in America, Unitarian Universalists have been doing church the way it ought to be: intelligent, inspiring, freethinking, socially progressive, and fun. We're not always what people expect, but we might just be what they're hoping for, and we're often exactly what they need.”

Amen.