

WHAT IS A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH?

Lima November 18, 2007

I have occasionally shared thoughts with you from the personal Credo we had to write in seminary. We were assigned to cover those things we were willing to assert and defend as our own about the five subjects of God, Revelation, Humankind, Church, and Jesus. I've revisited some of these, in sermons before, but this time I'm going to make , mostly minor, changes that reflect where I am now. From the title you can figure that this is from the section on Church. Of course this will be specifically about Unitarian Universalism and perhaps a bit about our congregation. One major change, I tried to make was to change the word "Church" to "Congregation". I didn't want this to wander into the uncharted territory of the "Church vs Fellowship" struggle. My hope was that by using the word "Congregation" I could be honest without inducing gag reflexes in anyone. The trouble was that "Congregation" didn't sound or feel right when I wanted to mean our association of congregations. It seemed much easier to judge by context whether I meant local or continental organizations if I used "Church" so that's what your getting..

When I wrote my Credo for school I drew very heavily on the pamphlet that had just come out on our ideas about Church and this is close to what I wrote.

"The Church is for meeting. It is for meeting each other. The Church is people who try to bring about the better by examining their own feelings of satisfaction or resentment, their own motivations, before making judgements on others. People who find fellowship in life-changing encounters with one another. The Church is people who are personally humble, who are not absolutely sure that their path is the only, or even the best, path to the *better*, who are able to consider the paths and dreams of others, who are willing to allow others to march to the drummer they hear.

The Church is for meeting all persons in fellowship and its task is to bridge all that divides humanity into friend/enemy, "our" kind/"their" kind. ignorant/educated, haves/have nots, the free/the enslaved, oppressed/oppressor. The Church must be the yeast which transforms the whole loaf, the seed which grows into a mighty tree of human siblinghood, the light by which humanity shall see to walk out of darkness. All churches are less than this, but if any church doesn't aspire and struggle to be this kind of Church it is without vision and its people are spiritually dying.

Originally people banded together out of a sense that they alone were not enough when confronting the terror of non-being. They then created Gods as a way of dealing with this sense of contingency. People can set almost anything up as their "God in front of God". Drugs, money sex, patriotism, god, family, power, religion, humanity, the list is endless and all of them work. That is they work for awhile at least, and while a particular god is serving to enable a particular person to cope with contingency it should be capitalized respectfully. But, part of the Church's function is iconoclastic, to destroy these lesser gods that betray the loyalty of human beings and to replace them with ideals more deserving of human loyalty and devotion. This function gets sticky if the Church is to remain radically humble. We are all worshiping a god that someone, at least, thinks they used to worship, but, since that god failed them when they most needed it, is now

recognize as an idol. Radical humility demands that we acknowledge that the God behind God stands behind all Gods. The love we have for others and our own lived experience demands that we try to spare others our pain. Here the Church and the individual is caught between a rock and a hard place. Right now I value humility more than iconoclasm so, while I will be as clear as possible in sharing my own experiences with others, I will also try very hard to assume differences between their god and my ex-god/idol. When push comes to shove I will let others make the same mistakes I've made and let them know I'm available. Hopefully my attitude can be empathy rather than "I told you so" and "let's find the pieces so you can put your life back together" rather than "here's how I did it".

A Church focused primarily on its minister, is only another preaching station. A Church focused primarily on its school of religion, is only another educational agency. A Church focused primarily on its potluck suppers, is only a cozy group of the self satisfied. A Church focused primarily on getting its budget adequately supported, is only another piece of social lumbar (tax free at that). A Church primarily focused on doing justice work, is only imitating more effective secular organizations. Even a Church which includes all these functions but fails to be more can make little legitimate claim to being a viable religious society. Primarily, a church is the quality of the interaction of all its friends and members, an interaction which cuts through every aspect, every fragment of program and activity within the congregation and thus produces a sense of community. Out of this arises a consensus which enriches and sustains.

I'm envisioning a church which is more than the sum of its parts. It is more than its buildings, or its gadgets, or the minister's sermons. A religious society is more than an audience, it is a congregation of people who care for one another and for the values of the common life. In this way the institution of the Church becomes truly human.

This vision is a Church for meeting all that is Just, True, Beautiful, and Good in an attitude of devotion. A vision of meeting our fellow humans with understanding, empathy and helpfulness in order to share and strengthen our deepest religious insights. This vision is a Church for meeting all humankind in the common struggle for BETTER."

That's something like what I wrote and my professor accepted it, in fact he liked it. Hell, I like it. Must have been the influence of our pamphlet. Anyway I'm now going to explore how Unitarian Universalists are different from what most of our friends consider "church" to be.

Most of our neighbors attend Christian churches which make at least one of two claims; 1) they are established by God to be His elect and favored few in the midst of an evil world, or 2) they are established by God to be the custodians of an ancient revelation and to offer sinful people the saving sacraments or formulas. Usually they will claim that wherever two or three are gathered together, Christ is in their midst.

Unitarian Universalists by contrast never make a claim of being keepers of a special revelation nor of having the answers which provide either a fire escape for those who fear Hell or a passport to those in hope of Heaven. Where two or three of us are gathered together, the smart money is betting that coffee will be served.

Our Association and this congregation are human institutions created and continued by people who for generations have desired and concluded that they needed an organized center for their personal and/or collective search for meaning. Neither our Association nor this congregation was ever ordained by any cosmic God out there somewhere. Both exist by the grace and human intention of the intimate and personal godlike conscience within each person. Both our Association and this congregation are living organisms. Both are limited by our collective weaknesses and advanced by our common strengths. Over several generations you, in this congregation have converted, maintained, and retained this building as your own, not as a monument to the past nor as an escape from the reality of the present, but as a place to gather to seek for answers to the age old questions of life, the nature of the universe, the purpose of being, the meaning of suffering, the patterns of destiny, the path to a better life here and now, lasting happiness. We know that none of the questions that really matter have been answered for all time, our best answers are tentative, personal, and open to change with new insight. Here we come to search for meaning for our time, place and situation. None of us pretend that our leaders, those of us required to make choices for all of us have always made decisions which most effectively moved us toward the vision of Church in my Credo. We have always been human and we always will be. Our Humanity is our Glory. What we can affirm is that each choice made was made with the best information that we could muster. Perhaps sometimes, individually, in hindsight, we may think other choices might have had better results. I think our survival is powerful evidence that we did very well. The real challenge is to continue making decisions and choices with less than perfect information. The more we can agree on a collective vision of what this congregation CAN become the closer that vision can be realized. The future is an exciting place.

We tend to call ourselves a liberal church. By this we mean that we affirm the freedom of the individual conscience to create, test, and accept/reject new answers as we seek to liberate our minds from the restrictions of blind faith, outlived custom and ancient superstition.

We frequently express pride in being without a creed. We have even said that our creed is to have no other creed. Here, we are encouraged to open ourselves to our natural curiosity and even our doubts. It is not our church that believes, but us individually who are believers. This church has no beliefs, no reverence, no faith, no questions, no answers, but it is a place where believing, reverent, questioning, and answering people will be found. We have no creed but individuals may have creeds, even those who are reluctant to articulate them. We have no doctrine by which to test your faith, but as individuals we build doctrines of faith which life tests continually, hence the endless need to adjust and change. I used to wonder at some of my friends churches which hold a revival almost every summer. I have been heard to joke about why Christians need reviving so often. We are attuned with Francis David at his proclamation of *Semper Reformada* (Continuous Reformation), so I guess our congregation is almost always being revived. We always close our worship by joining hands and reciting our covenant. This is a ritual part of our worship and is closer to being a goal to strive for than a requirement for joining. We need

to create more worship rituals which we can imbue with meaning. Within living memory most of our congregations have added, to their worship, candles or flowers for commemorating joys and concerns, an annual water ceremony, flower communions, naming ceremonies and ceremonies for formally welcoming new members. Each of these innovations have made our corporate worship more beautiful, more powerful and more meaningful.

We provide a time and a place, leadership and companionship by which, as someone has said, “to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable”. We are organized to offer the tools, however imperfect, for the continual creation of personal religion.

One of these tools is our emphasis on using reason in religion as in all other areas of our lives. We have been endowed in the process of our evolution with intelligence that we may “prove all things and hold fast to that which is good”. Admittedly our powers of reason are limited by our experience and our faith extends beyond what may be rationally demonstrated, still we maintain that religious beliefs cannot be contrary to reason.

Our final authority is not a single set of books, not even the set in our library upstairs, it is not in one person’s vision, not in church tradition or doctrine. Although for inspiration we look to each of these, to the world of literature, social studies, philosophy, and science, the final authority is in every person. Many sources may provide insight and answers that are significant for us, but the final test is whether they square with your reason, your experience, your own and personal inner light. Here is our authority.

From this it follows that our method must be democratic. As a church we impose no fence around your faith, we may ask that you find a faith. We are reluctant to establish High Holy Days, for we want to affirm the potential of every day to be holy. We have no holy persons because we affirm the potential of each of us, at one time or another to have some degree of sacredness. We have no single volume wherein all truth may be found because we try to recognize truth wherever we read it. If your religion is your way of life, life will provide the disciplines that you must live, and your own devotion, your religious response will bring you to prayer when you need prayer and will bring you to seek the counsel of others when and if you need the counsel of others. Indeed it will prepare you to offer counsel to others when it is sought. This is not an easy faith, it is a challenging one that each of us, with the help of the rest of us, must meet as best we can.

Our methods and our words are different than our orthodox friends but we ask many of the same sort of questions and hope many of the same sort of hopes. We would rarely call it salvation but most of us are committed, even devoted, to processes that we believe will lead to self improvement and social betterment.

For the most part we consider religion to be concerned with the here and now. Of course we concern ourselves with questions about death and immortality but mostly we emphasize applying our religion to this life. Life is one and religion is no less than the sum total of the meaning of life.

Most of us are embarrassed by missionary zeal but we are interested in letting others know who we are, what we do, how we think, and what we hope for. We are interested in interesting others whose inclination is for our kind of church. A church, as

Channing would have said; “from which none can be excommunicated...except by the death of goodness in their breast.” We are interested in welcoming into our congregation inquiring minds and spirits. We are interested in attracting spiritually alive and morally sensitive people to our congregation. We would be less than human if each of us didn't occasionally have a stray thought that if the congregation doubled its size - would we personally still be important to the congregation? When we welcome new members we invite them to change us in unspecified ways. That is an incredibly courageous act. Don't let any of your friends tell you that you have no faith and that Unitarian Universalism has no faith. None of their churches do anything half as scary when they welcome a new member. We believe that people in our congregation can work together for the improvement of character and the cultivation of a courageous faith without conforming to a set pattern of theological doctrines. We agree to seek understanding not necessarily in agreement, but in the spirit of confidence in life, trust in each other individually and in all of us collectively, and in the use of reasonable feelings and feelingful reason.

This all seems necessarily personal and we are sophisticated enough to realize that, in theory, each of us could do for themselves what we try to do together as a church. In fact we have seen many join us in the past to learn just that fact and then leave. I have often heard it said that new people join us and after we show them that they can live without the guilt that many of them were carrying with them, they leave and never come back. Each of us COULD pursue a program of study and thought on the highest and most noble that can be discovered internally and externally, very few of us WILL do this alone. And it is a statement of MY faith that I believe that I could not do it as well alone as in the company of this congregation and this Association. We are social beings and if our approach to religion is to have any social significance it must be a social force. We are busy active people, we take time for a church of our choosing and of our making, so that we will not become so busy with things that we forget about the cultivation of our better selves. Sure, we frequently despair at the failures of institutionalized religion but we institutionalize our own in the hope that its unique atmosphere, its progressive message, and its ethical emphasis may serve as leaven in the loaves of our community, our society and ourselves. All that we hope for collectively might be done individually, however we affirm not only our solitary selves, but our social being. Therefore we have a church that combines reason and emotion, individuality and society, worship and works.

To such a church you are invited to not only come but to participate - not only to partake but to share - not only to absorb but to spread - in the creation of inner faith, stronger individuals, a richer community and a better society.

Amen!!

WHY I ATTEND CHURCH

One of the former ministers of our congregation in Akron after he retired and had spent some time as part of a congregation, had this to say about church attendance. “The truth of the matter is that I do not go to worship to hear or listen to sermons. Years as a minister had tricked me into thinking of it as the main event, the central happening, the make-or-break occasion in the week. It’s not so for me now.

Another discovery - not so surprising - was how important the aesthetic elements are. The music - the quality of it and its reverent presentation - seem a gift of grace. The building itself with its own history, its aura of human striving, ecstasy and agony, the grandeur of its dimensions, is transporting. The flowers, the programs, the pew racks are important. Nothing is trivial.

Still another revelation was the extent to which I miss the experience on the very rare occasions when I do not get to church on Sunday. I had often thought on a Sunday, I’m not sure I’d be here if I didn’t have to be. Now I think differently. The Sunday obligation is simply the obligation to myself - and to others - to remember who I am and what I am doing. I do tend to forget. I go to church to remember, to be reminded of, to recollect, to refresh my sense of who I am and what I am doing. I am persuaded that, for me, there is no adequate substitute. I do not go for fellowship or like-minded company, or intellectual stimulation. I go to remember. I do tend to forget.”