

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Church – Unitarian Universalist

“Why You Should Not Be a Unitarian Universalist”

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My talking about why you should NOT be a Unitarian Universalist may seem like a curiously self-defeating thing to do. And yet, how practical: to declare clearly what liberal religion is not, so that those who may consider joining with us will have no misconceptions, and those who are already members—will be reminded of **why** you are here.

My inclination to do this stems from a recognition of the fact that what most people seem to want, in the way of religion, is quite different from what we maintain here, which is probably why we constitute such a small percentage of the population.

This is not to say that we couldn't and shouldn't grow numerically. There are many thousands of Americans who could be UU's, because they share our assumptions regarding religion. But there are millions more who really should not consider joining our Church, for reasons which I will explain:

First, if you want the “sense of security” which stems from a fixed set of beliefs, (a creed) formulated by a supposedly infallible authority, I advise you not to join our ranks.

I say that because there ARE many persons who, apparently, DO believe that the “Truth” has been revealed by some infallible authority, which has provided final answers to life's great questions. They want what I call a pipe-line religion, with special access to a divine source of understanding.

But, when people who are so inclined, become UU's it is usually a mistake. For ours is a non-creedal religion, stressing the sacredness of personal integrity and freedom from external authority.

We do this for several reasons, one being that we know of no institution or writing which is infallible; they are all human and, therefore, subject to error. So, their claims to truth must be verified by our own experience.

One of my favorite illustrations of that belief is the story of a young man who said to his girlfriend, “Sarah, it's been revealed to me that you should be my bride.” The girl replied, “John, when it's been revealed to me, I'll let you know!” That's our stance: every claim to special revelation must be corroborated by our own experience.

But not everyone wants that much freedom and responsibility; many want boundaries for their belief and sacred, unchanging truths which can be accepted “on faith.” For them, our crucial affirmation, that everyone must be free to formulate his/her own beliefs, is a threatening idea. And it is scary to be told that you're on our own theologically, that there is no pipeline to truth, that we've got to find out for ourselves what is true and right.

But, if you're inclined to envy the seeming certainty of the dogmatic faiths, you should remember “The Bulls-eye Story.” It tells of a man who went into a small town one day and noticed bulls-eyes everywhere with bullet holes in their centers. He expressed his admiration of the marksman to a local resident who replied, “Oh, don't pay any attention to those; they're made by the village idiot. He shoots first, then draws the circles.”

Well, that's the kind of activity which takes place when someone says, the Catholic Pope is infallible. When I ask how they know that, they reply, “Because Jesus gave Peter ‘the Keys to the Kingdom’, and Peter, as the first Bishop of Rome, passed his infallibility down to the succeeding popes.” When I ask further how they know that such an interpretation of the Biblical passage is true, they respond, in more sophisticated language, “Of course, it's true; the Pope says so, and the Pope... is infallible.”

A similar example of shooting first and drawing the circles afterwards, can be seen in the fundamentalist insistence that the Bible is the word of God: it says so in Chapter such-and-such, verse so-and-so. Don't envy these people; it's better to be free of that kind of “certainty.” It has no enduring value.

Our stress on freedom, however, is a burden as well as a strength: a burden because it often means living with unresolved questions, but also a strength because the process is so sound and will lead to more enduring answers to life's great questions. The closed mind will never discover and correct its errors; but an open mind, eventually, will always learn more of what is true

Therein lies a more durable “sense of security” for those who can live with the short-term uncertainty: a confidence in the value of the process. Those who can't grasp that - shouldn't be UU's.

Secondly, if you want an omnipotent God who is willing to suspend the laws of nature in response to prayer, our approach to religion is not for you. Many of us do believe in prayer but not that prayer will persuade a cosmic-errand-boy deity to alter the natural order of things on our behalf; some of us believe that our prayer can generate healing energy, and others simply believe that prayer changes people, and people change things.

Our faith had always emphasized rationality and a naturalistic view of God. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**, “the patron saint” of our faith, wrote, “**Religion that is afraid of science dishonors God!**” I would put it more strongly: to worship a God whose behavior is contrary to the laws of reason and natural order—is pure superstition.

But here again we find that those of us who hold this view are in a minority. Most people seem to believe in a God who can, and will, manipulate the forces of nature, at our behest, for reasons beyond our understanding.

There are many among us who stand in awe before the reality of spiritual mystery, and regard worship as an endeavor to connect with that mystery. Many also believe in a purposeful Life-force, which some call “God,” but we would strive to understand these experiences as part of the natural order.

Related to the supernatural conception of God is a view of the world which also makes our religion unappealing to those who hold it. Designated by theologians as “asceticism,” it regards the material world as inherently evil: something to be subdued. If that’s your belief, you better look for another Church, for ours is world-affirming faith, one which would celebrate nature.

Which leads to my last point: if you want a religion which can be compartmentalized: separating “spiritual” matters from daily life and kept in a for-use-on-Sunday-morning-only pigeonhole, this Church is not for you.

As I said earlier, ours is not a creedal religion: it does not require conformity to a set of beliefs, BUT it does assume that your personal beliefs, arrived at freely, will permeate and influence your ethical and political decisions.

And, again, the fact is that many do not want that kind of religion. What they seem to prefer is a **pietistic ceremonialism** which can be subordinated to their social and political views. I call it “the Coca Cola concept of religion:” every Sunday morning “the pause that refreshes” leaving no unpleasant after-taste of ethical interference with their daily lives.

Well, UU’s cannot accept that. Recognizing that the word religion means to bind together, we believe our faith is what binds our lives into a coherent whole. We cannot, therefore, separate our beliefs from our behavior.

Having said that, however, let me swing to the opposite end of the spectrum of unlikely candidates for UU Church membership and warn that, if you are merely looking for another social action instrument, for the pursuance of personal political views, our Church will not be satisfying for you either.

We, of course, believe in the crucial importance of social action—as an expression of our religious belief. But that is a secondary concern of our community of faith and not its primary purpose.

The central function of our faith is to create a caring community which respects differences of belief (even political) and nurtures the moral and spiritual growth of individuals, as we engage in a search for truth, and endeavor to serve the causes of humanity.

So, if you are looking for another chapter of the Democratic Party, or the ACLU, or Habitat for Humanity, I can give you their addresses, because I support them all. BUT, if all you’re looking for is another channel for your social concerns, I do not encourage you to join us, because our effort is to be much more.

To close on a positive note, we are a religious endeavor which is committed to exploring the depths and heights of human experience, seeking an understanding of the very meaning of life and striving to play a responsible role in the world around us.

So, if you are someone who wants freedom to formulate your own religious beliefs, who prefers a rational and naturalistic approach to questions, and, if you seek a community which will respect your individual beliefs, **you’re in the right place —for that is the character of our faith.**