

Why You Should Not Be a Unitarian Universalist

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Somebody I met recently described the Unitarian Universalist Church as a place that welcomes Christians, Jews, Agnostics, and even a German shepherd or two. He was trying to be funny, and I laughed. But behind his remarks was an unwarranted assumption: that anybody can get in here. And behind that myth is another one: that we don't stand for anything.

My friends, not everyone can be a Unitarian Universalist. Not everyone should be a Unitarian Universalist. Because the first criterion for getting into this church is: you've got to know how to sin. That's very important to us; and not everyone knows how to do it. We don't want people here who never do wicked things. We don't want people here who are holier than thee or thou. We don't want people who have made it in the salvation department and are just waiting around to get picked up. Because people with too much heaven in them are hell to live with.

Now don't get me wrong. If there were any perfect human beings around, we might let them in. But since there aren't any, anyone who claims he/she doesn't do wicked things is either trying to fool others, or trying to fool themselves. It is the nature of the human to be evil as well as good. And you should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you're not willing to admit that about yourself. As a matter of fact, recognition of your evil has great power for mobilizing compassion. I say that from my experience in counseling. Some of the best therapists are the ones who know how to sin a little, maybe a lot. They're more tolerant of the human condition. They react with compassion rather than self-righteousness, with understanding instead of judgment.

I notice this phenomenon in myself when I'm driving. If someone in another car does something really jerky, like dart out in front of me or make a left turn out of a right lane. I get mad at first, but then I remember all the dumb things I've done, especially in my first few years of driving, and I can't be mad anymore.

Not long ago, I was driving up Main Street and I saw a pedestrian crossing the street right in front of me, and I thought, why don't these people obey the stop-and-go lights? Pedestrians are always jay-walking. And this guy crossing the street even had the nerve to look at me funny, as if I were in the wrong. The arrogance of that guy!

And then about twenty seconds later I see red flashing lights behind me and I pull over. The policeman asks me if I know what he's stopping me for. I didn't know. Turns out I had just moseyed right on through a red light.

Believe me, that incident has infinitely raised my compassion for jerky drivers. A little sin will do that for you. That's why I think it should be a criterion for membership.

Now, if you think you're too good, you won't like it here. But with a little bit of hypocrisy and selfishness and deceit, you'll do fine. We're not asking you to try to develop those qualities, because you don't need to. Each and every one of you already has them. We're just asking you to recognize them in yourself. It will do wonders for your tolerance of others' foibles.

The second criterion of reason for not being a Unitarian Universalist has to do with our intolerance of intolerance. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you support the Nazis, or the KKK, or any other group that believes in oppressing people. We may be open in this church, but we're not that open. We are closed to things like closure. That is, we are closed to movements or groups that close off people. And when we say our church has freedom of belief, we mean that in a limited way. You are free to believe whatever you want here, but only as long as it helps you live a caring and humane life, or it at least doesn't prevent you from living a caring life. That's a very real limitation on freedom of belief. So when someone says, "*What do Unitarian Universalists believe?*" and you answer, "*Oh, we believe whatever we want to,*" that's not quite true. There are a lot of things we do not believe in. We don't believe in limiting people because of their race or color, for example. We don't believe in restricting people on the basis of gender. We don't believe in excluding people because of disability. We don't believe in denying rights to those whose personal preference or lifestyle is different from the norm, so long as that lifestyle doesn't infringe on other people's rights. We don't believe in destroying the environment. We don't believe that injustice and poverty are just unfortunate accidents that we don't have any responsibility to do something about. There are some very definite limitations on freedom of belief in this church, and those are some of them. These are rather different from the limitations of belief in some other churches.

Have you ever stopped to think about some of the creeds in the history of Christianity? Many of you, I'm sure, remember the Apostles' Creed. I learned it so well I can recite it verbatim (but I have to do it fast or I trip up on the words).

I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth and in Jesus Christ, his only son our lord who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell, the third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. Amen.

Now, did you catch anything in there about love or peace or kindness? You can argue that those things are implied in the Apostles' Creed, but they're certainly not given any explicit emphasis. That's a creed made up on doctrines, with the ethics only vaguely implied. If the Unitarian Universalists have a creed, it's an ethical creed, with the doctrines only vaguely implied, if at all. Read the principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association sometime and you'll see what I mean. You'll find words like: "*justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,*" "*acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth,*" "*affirming and promoting the inherent*

worth and dignity of every person,” and “the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.” You won’t find: “*conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary,*” and you won’t find: “*the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father... begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.*” Doctrinal precepts like that, well, we don’t care much one way or the other which of them you believe, as long as whatever you believe helps you live a humane life.

For example, if believing in God helps you be a better person, or at least doesn’t make you a worse person, then fine, believe in it. We encourage your belief. If being an atheist helps you take more responsibility for creating a better world, or at least doesn’t prevent you, then fine, don’t believe in God. We encourage your atheism. The only beliefs we don’t want you to have in this church are the ones that lead you to hurt people. And, other than the obvious ones I already mentioned, I can’t tell you what the bad beliefs are, because sometimes the same beliefs do different things for different people. Yes, they do. For example, a lot of folks believe that there’s a heaven and a hell after you die. For some people, that is positive, because they wouldn’t be good otherwise. I would rather have you trying to be good because you realize that’s a better way to live, rather than because you’re afraid of punishment or hoping for reward. But if you’re not going to be good without believing in heaven or hell, then it’s a positive belief in your case. I’m reminded of the story of one woman who came to her minister.

“Revrend,” she sobbed, “something has to be done about my husband. He doesn’t come home at night; he doesn’t help the children. Instead he’s gallivanting all over town, gambling, drinking, running after women.”

“You have my deepest sympathy,” commiserated the minister. “Your husband is a miserable sinner.”

“A sinner he is, Revrend,” the woman said, “but miserable, no he ain’t. He’s having the time of his life.”

If you’re sinning and having the time of your life, and by sinning I mean doing things to hurt people, then maybe it would be better if you believed in future punishment for evil. If you’re not going to be good without believing that, then it’s a positive belief. If believing in an afterlife doesn’t make you any better, but it doesn’t make you any worse either, then it’s a neutral belief. But for some people, believing in heaven and hell is negative because then they start deciding who’s going to heaven and who’s going to hell, always under God’s guidance, of course! And they end up condemning people and passing discriminatory laws against people in general and making the world a less tolerant place.

So, for some people, believing in an afterlife is negative, and for some people not believing in an afterlife is very positive because earthly life is more sacred to them that way. War and killing are greater evils to them because these are more final if there’s no immortal soul. Human life becomes precious. And eliminating hunger and poverty on this earth becomes a more important task, because they don’t believe in “*pie in the sky when you die.*” So not believing in an afterlife makes

some people more humane. We don't care which way you have it, as long as you're humane. That's the limitation we put on freedom of belief.

You may be interested to know, by the way, that the Universalist side of our tradition used to belong to the National Council of Churches. They were eventually kicked out for not believing enough. In fact, the Orthodox Church said, *"If you let the Universalists in, we won't join."* So they let the Orthodox in and ushered the Universalists out. You see, every denomination that now belongs to the National Council of Churches has to believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and savior. That's the one criterion. So, we don't fit in. That one little thing. It doesn't sound like a whole lot to ask, does it? And maybe that's why we wouldn't want to belong even if they wanted us. Maybe we'd want more of a criterion for belief than that, like love, humanity, civil rights, peace, and equality. Belief in Christ is definitely not necessary for joining this church, and even if it were, it wouldn't be sufficient for joining this church. We want more than that from you.

You may also be interested to know that our church in Racine is in the middle of an area called the Downtown Cooperative Parish. That's a group of about a dozen churches in the downtown area that get together for various ecumenical projects like a food bank for the hungry. They allow us to contribute food to the food bank, but we're not allowed to be a member of the Downtown Cooperative Parish. Why? Because we don't all accept Christ as Lord and savior, which is the one criterion for getting in. The criterion for membership isn't how much you care for your fellow woman or man and it's not how much you care for the oppressed and the hurting and the outcast. It's whether you believe Christ is God. Frankly, that's not enough for me anyway.

You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if that's all you believe. We expect a lot more than that. We expect beliefs that carry through in concern for those around you and if you don't have them, you should not be a Unitarian Universalist.

You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you expect the minister to always have the same views you do. That's the third criterion. I'm not as liberal as some of you would like me to be; I'm not as conservative as some of you would like me to be, sometimes I dress funny, and sometimes I say things that you might think are pretty dumb.

You know, I read a sermon rating system somewhere that sort of coincides with the movie ratings. A **"G"** rating means the sermon is generally acceptable to everyone, full of inoffensive platitudes, usually described as "wonderful." **"PG,"** is for more mature congregations. At times this sermon is relevant to today's issues; it may contain even mild suggestions for change. Often described as "challenging" or "thought provoking," even though no one intends to take any action or change any attitudes. An **"R"** rating is definitely restricted for those not easily upset. Threatening to the comfortable; most often described as "disturbing". And finally, **"X"** rated sermons: positively limited to those who can handle explosive ideas. This sermon is always described as "shocking" or "in poor taste." The minister who preaches this sermon had better have an outside source of income and an established rapport with a pulpit committee of a church looking for a minister.

You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you don't like getting offended. If you haven't been offended yet, it's only because you haven't been around long enough. In trying to sermonize on

some of the issues in our lives today, I'm bound to hit some raw nerves and you'd better be ready for it. At least you know it's not personal. I care about you, and the fact that we disagree at times in no way takes away from that.

You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you're a Christian who doesn't think atheists belong here. You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you're an atheist who thinks Christians don't belong here, or Buddhists, or psychics, or pagans, or spiritualists. Remember the criterion for membership here is humane living. The rest is a matter of individual choice.

You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you want all the answers because we don't even know all the questions.

Finally, you should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you can't stand name calling. You are likely to get it by staying here. When you tell people you're Unitarian Universalist, some of them will seize on the more sensational aspects of this church. *"Oh, you're that atheist church,"* or *"You're those people who worship flowers."* Labeling is a price that you pay and a risk you take in belonging to this church. Some people who used to be members here, decided not to take that risk. Then there are others who decided that those who label and name call reveal more about themselves than about this church. There's bravery in the decision to stay. There's courage in not running out when you're under fire. And, if it's any consolation, Unitarians and Universalists have had a long history of being labeled and vilified, and of responding with courage that comes from faith in the human race, from the days when UU's fought that respectable institution called slavery, to their battle for women's rights to vote and their struggle for civil liberties.

You should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you don't like diversity, and you should not be a Unitarian Universalist if you can't stand the name calling that will inevitably result from being a diverse church.

My thanks to all of you who have stuck it out!