

IS THIS YOUR RELIGION?
Rev. Dr. Sheldon W. Bennett
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Let me again give a warm welcome to all of you, and especially to those of you who are visiting for the first time. I am glad you are here – for several reasons. I am glad that you are taking back your time this morning from the many things that you could be doing – shopping, reading the newspaper, going for a walk in the woods, puttering about the house. These all good things, but I am glad you are taking this time to open your hearts and minds to the hopes and aspirations of your life - to the deeper questions of your soul - to things that matter most of all.

Perhaps you will find here a spiritual home in which to deepen your lives and connect with other thoughtful people in shared concern for making a compassionate, just and peaceful world and caring for the earth. Or, it may be that our Unitarian Universalist way of religious life is not for you. That's OK, too. We honor your personal quest, and we are grateful that you are visiting us today.

Whatever your particular path, I hope that in this one hour of worship with us you will hear a word, that you will receive an insight, or that you will experience something that will raise a question or inspire a decision that will lead you forward in your faith journey wherever it takes you next. As I speak about our Unitarian Universalist faith, as you reflect on your experience here this morning, I encourage you to be asking yourself – “Is this your religion?”

Let me first begin briefly with a story. It is my own story. Although it is unique in its details, in its broad theme my story is not all that different from the stories of many people here. I grew up in a large, evangelical protestant church in Seattle. I loved the energy and spirit of that church. I loved singing the hymns. But the doctrines and beliefs were too narrow. There was too much focus on being saved and getting to heaven. But I heard little concern about the world here and now, the world in which I actually lived. I heard little concern for the problems of nuclear war, racism, poverty, and social injustice.

I was told that there was only one way to heaven, which I thought was a bit unfair to Jews and Buddhists and Muslims and people of African religions. I thought they were wonderful people, too. I loved learning about Moses and Jesus and things that happened millennia ago, and those stories continue to inspire me today. In high school, I read about different world religions. I became fascinated by the universe that science discovers. I left the church of my childhood. I wanted to know the mystery of the cosmos. I wanted to understand atoms and galaxies and the wonder of life. So, I studied physics – a whole lot of physics, in fact. But science was not to be my path, nor could it be my religion.

For me, turning 30 was a major psychic event. I was sure that the best part of life was over. Actually, it was just beginning – it just didn't feel that way. I felt the need for religious community, but not just any community. I visited a number of churches and was disappointed by the same narrow, dogmatic, and not-engaged-with-the-world frame of mind that had led me to leave church in the first place.

One Sunday, I walked into a Unitarian Universalist church - First and Second Church in Boston as it happened. No one tried to convert me. No one told me I had to stop thinking. No one was making me wrong because of the doubts and questions I had

in my own mind and conscience. I felt welcomed for just who I was and for just where I was in my faith journey. It was so refreshing and so healing.

Years passed. My consciousness deepened, and I felt myself called by a greater love than my own to respond to the injustice and hurt of the world in a new way. One path led to another, and here I am today. Now I am not suggesting that by joining a Unitarian Universalist church you will find yourself one day a minister. We each have our own path to follow. We each have our own destiny to discover and fulfill. But I can assure you of this – and I must warn you. This church does change lives. Maybe it's not by a sudden conversion experience. But I have watched with joy as I have seen lives deepen and come into their own through their participation in the life of this congregation. I have seen it happen many times.

Now, the first thing I want you to know is that our Unitarian Universalist faith – we often say “UU” for short – is not religion as usual. Sometimes when you ask a UU what Unitarian Universalists believe, you may get a puzzled or even an anxious look as they honestly strive to answer what in fact is not exactly the right question. They could say what they *personally* believe. Some of us believe in God and some do not. For some of us, Jesus is important, and for others Buddha, or the teachings of Lao Tzu, or a long list of more contemporary religious figures or spiritual writers. We tend not to worship any of these figures as deities, but rather we are inspired by their teachings and by the example of their lives. Some of us find our inspiration through communing with nature, and others by engaging the world in social action for a more just and equitable society or to protect the environment. And others might say that they believe in trying to be a good person – which for most of us is sufficient challenge enough.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is not about an ancient myth. It is not about something that happened long ago. It is not about a historical event or any single prophet, although we do have a rich heritage that challenges and inspires us. Our faith is not about professing a particular creed or doctrine about metaphysical things that no one can ever know for sure. It is not about practicing certain rituals in exactly the right way.

You see, our faith is not a set of rules. It is not a particular spiritual technology, although we do encourage one another to develop a personal spiritual practice, be it meditation, prayer, journal writing, spiritual reading, and so forth. We do not promote a formula or proclaim a single answer. So, while we can talk about what we believe personally, we cannot easily sum up what all Unitarian Universalists believe in a simple formula that respects the individual freedom of conscience that we cherish as a church.

So, what *do* we believe together as Unitarian Universalists? I love talking with people from other faith traditions. When Molly and I were in Nairobi, Kenya, last year we had the wonderful experience of dinner at the home of a Somali family, who were friends of my sister, together with a number of their friends. There we were – Muslims, Evangelical Christians, and two Unitarian Universalists – energetically comparing religions over a platter of camel meat and rice pilaf. We had a wonderful time. The Muslims were fascinated with the open-mindedness of our Unitarian Universalist faith. The Evangelicals were troubled by it. The Muslims were intrigued by our emphasis on individual freedom of mind and right of conscience. But as always happens, they soon wanted to know, “But what do you *believe*? If everyone is free to believe whatever they choose, what holds your religion together?”

This is the question that gets right to the unique genius of our Unitarian Universalist faith. Instead of offering a set of well defined doctrines and beliefs, our Unitarian Universalist faith offers a way of life. It offers an orientation of heart and mind. It offers a way of walking together for a better world that is inclusive and that respects the unique differences of our individual personalities and life stories.

Ours is a tradition that encourages us each to choose our own path and to follow it – whether we are social activists or mystics or ordinary good folks trying to live with integrity and kindness and to become the best people we can. Ours is a way of life that seeks to live by the universal love that we experience as being at the heart of life. Ours is a way of life that honors the dignity of all life and that affirms the values of justice, and compassion, and treating people fairly and with respect.

Historically, our Unitarian Universalist faith is the merger of two separate traditions – Unitarian and Universalist. Both have roots deep in American and world religious history. Our origins are Christian and have modern roots in Europe at the liberal end of the Reformation in the 1500's. Francis David, a founder and leader of Unitarian faith in Transylvania in the 1560's famously said, "We don't have to think alike to love alike." This is a radical insight into the nature of religion. We honor a diversity of ideas while calling ourselves to respond to the universal love which is at the heart of life, to the love that is universal to our essential humanity.

Over the past two centuries our vision has broadened to include wisdom from the other world religions and from enlightenment and contemporary philosophy. Our religious vision also takes science seriously, especially the spirit of science which calls us to test our religious thinking against the reality of the world and of our life experience. We insist on using our human powers of reason to help discern spiritual truth from superstition or fanciful imagination.

Most of all, our religion is about freedom. It is about intellectual freedom to seek truth and to follow that truth where it will lead us. It is about spiritual freedom from the hates and prejudices and the intolerant fundamentalisms that so divide humanity and cause so much violence and war. Our religion is about freedom for honest thought, and for equal justice, and for seeking the fullness of life with open minds and caring hearts. Ours is a religion that affirms democracy as a principle of faith, as witnessed, for example, by our own John Adams. Our commitment to the use of democracy in our congregations and society honors our recognition that spiritual authority rests in each person and reflects the sacredness that is in each human personality.

Historically, Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of social reform – the fight to end slavery (John Quincy Adams was one) – the struggle for women's suffrage – and prison reform. Unitarians died for civil rights at Selma. Today, we advocate for anti-racism, for women's rights, and for equal rights for all persons without regard to their sexual identity, including equal civil rights of marriage. We value families in all their many forms. This congregation, for example, is a founding member of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization – GBIO – in which we work together with people of other faiths to build the public good.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith represents a radically new understanding of religion. In today's postmodern world with its increasing pluralism, ours is a religious understanding that offers a hopeful and necessary alternative. At the same time we honor diversity of personal religious belief, we also succeed in sustaining spiritual communities

– congregations – based not a uniform dogmas, but based on principles of how we are to be in community together – principles such as the worth and dignity of every person, justice, fairness, compassion, and the vision of one humanity, interdependent with one nature.

As much as we affirm freedom of personal belief, we believe that religious community is important. We believe that it is part of our spiritual nature as human beings to be in community. UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed, for example, wrote that “the central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a relationship discovered amid the particulars of own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for justice. ... The religious community is essential,” he said, “for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

Rev. Morrison-Reed was talking in particular about how religious community is essential for the work of social justice. What he says is just as true for the purpose and meaning of our personal lives as well. “Alone our vision is too narrow, our strength is too limited.”

That is why we gather for worship on Sunday mornings, to renew our essential connectedness to our own humanity, to larger life, and the world in which we live. It is the one spiritual practice that we do together as Unitarian Universalists. Something spiritually important happens when we worship together. We are called out from ourselves to a larger purpose and richer vision for our time and place here on this earth.

If you are looking for definite answers, or for a prescribed path to follow, or for rules to obey, this may not be your religion. But if you are looking for a community of thoughtful, caring people with whom to explore your spiritual questions in freedom, from whom to receive encouragement in your quest for deeper meaning and purpose, with whom to join in building a just, compassionate, and peaceful world, then this may be the religion for you. If so, I look forward to seeing you next Sunday! – and many Sundays after.