



Sermon

We UUs often say we promote “deeds not creeds.” The word ‘creed’ is from the Latin and literally means “I believe.” And so does the word “credo.”

But we generally use the word ‘credo’ to mean “what I believe,” and we use the word ‘creed’ to mean what everyone who is within our religion believes– or should believe. Creeds are usually used to draw lines between who gets invited in, and who is excluded out.

We UUs have credos but not creeds. Or it might be more accurate to say that the only creed we have is that we have no creed. This answer doesn’t score a lot of points with people asking us questions about what we believe.

Today I would like to cover how to deal with questions people ask you about Unitarian Universalism, and one question in particular that seems to come up over and over again.

I think these questions can be particularly difficult for newbie UUs. Let’s say you like the services, and now that you’ve been coming for a few weeks, months, or decades members of your larger family are asking you: Unitarian? What are they all about?

So, this morning I want to give you my strategy about what to say about Unitarian Universalism when someone asks “What do You Believe?”

There are two main points to my strategy in answering this question: (1) understanding your questioner’s mind-set, and (2) getting past the “identified patient.”

It sounds straightforward enough: What do You Believe? But a whole lot is usually packed into those four words, more than we may immediately recognize.

For example, the second person singular and the second person plural in English is the same: it’s the word “you.”

What do you believe? This could mean what do you as an individual believe. But it could also mean what do you Unitarian Universalists believe? An orthodox person would assume the answers would be identical. And of course, they would be wrong. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

In most orthodox traditions it wouldn’t make much difference what the questioner intended because in orthodoxy– which means “right belief”– what you believe and what your co-religionists believe and what your denomination says, all amount to the same thing. Or at least it’s supposed to.

If we consider– very broadly– how many people have an orthodox conception of religion, the numbers are staggering. For context, let me state that the 2008 UUA directory says there are 164,000 churchgoing UUs in the world.

Compare that to 300 million Buddhists, 2 billion Christians, 1.6 billion Muslims, 4 million Jainists, 6 million Bahais, and 13 million Jews. And all of those religions have a similar structure. Billions of people practice these religions and their conception of what a religion is tends to be like each others and quite different from ours.

Consider orthodoxy: you have a single text or group of texts. You have your major prophet from the Almighty. You have a single creed or small group of creeds. You have a singular revelation event of where the Divine encountered the Human, and it happened once, long ago. Revelation is sealed.

In orthodoxy all the parts fit together. Unitarian Universalism doesn’t work that way. We find inspiration in many texts, prophets, and events.

In orthodoxy– which means ‘right belief’– the meta-story, the overarching story, begins in the remote past and ends there too. Your main job as a follower, is to reenact the story today, living faithfully by the values and stories taught to you by your parents– who learned it from their parents, all the way back, in unbroken line to the creation of the universe.

So an orthodox person assumes all this when they think about religion because that is how they have been taught to think about it. It’s relatively simple. It’s straightforward. All questions have answers that can be memorized. It is a finite, self-contained system.

Your main job is to learn the system, and then all of life’s questions will be answered– in the text, in the revelation of the prophet, in the creed. Anything puzzling can be answered authoritatively by your religious leader, or even your co-religionist.

So, now you know strategy number (1): remember your questioner’s likely mind-set, which brings me to strategy number (2): getting past the “identified patient.”

The identified patient is a term I picked up in psychology. In family systems therapy, a family might come in with a problem. They present themselves as two parents and a daughter who is acting out. All 3 agree on this. But rather than send in just the daughter, the whole family comes in.

In the course of conversation, the therapist learns that the parents are fighting– maybe passive aggressive, so it isn’t all out in the open, but it affects the kid, and so the daughter acts out.

So the daughter’s behavior is the “identified patient” the behavior that the family things needs to be fixed. But to the therapist, the daughter is only the “identified patient.”

The real patient may be the parent’s relationship that is causing unhappiness in the family system, and the daughter’s behavior is only a symptom, not the problem itself. Are you with me so far?

So the question, What do You Believe? is really a kind of identified patient. What do I believe? Believe about what? The question by itself, is meaningless.

I have learned through hard experience that trying to answer an overly general question like that is unsatisfying to me and to the questioner.

In my early days as a minister, when I would get “the question,” I would often attempt a verbal dissertation, a broad and sweeping analysis about the variety of belief, the depth and breadth of practice, theology, until I ran out of steam. Then I would usually get at the question that the person really wanted answered.

Sometimes it was: what do you believe about life after death, or resurrection, or salvation? Or Jesus? And more often than I cared to admit, there was only some simple thing they wanted to know.

They didn’t care about famous UUs, they didn’t care about the social justice work we did.

They were asking a question as if to settle a bet with themselves about who we were. Then they could fit us neatly into a pre-ordained category, and then move on to something less exotic.

They, like the rest of the world when it thinks about religion at all– assume orthodoxy. It doesn’t occur to them to ask about our creed, our prophet, our single text, our creation story, because they assume it is like the rest of orthodoxy with minor variations.

They assume some single thing that makes us weird, caused a schism and founded a new orthodox denomination– isn’t that how all religions are formed?

So, if the first question is the identified patient– What do You Believe? And we ask what do you mean? And their second question is what they really want to know– say about our creed, then often there will be an immediate 3rd question along the lines of “yes, but.”

As in “yes, I understand you say you have no creed, but– “ and now, we’re rolling. Because now we’re cracking the mold of orthodoxy and all kinds of things are spilling out. Suddenly, some of their assumptions about religion– all of it is orthodox, all of it is creedal, all of it is about the afterlife– suddenly our UU faith doesn’t fit the mold– it’s broken the mold, and bits of it are running rampant.

So, to recap strategy. When someone asks you What do You Believe? I think the best thing to do is– ignore the question. The best thing to do is respond with your own question: What do you mean?

Because the question What do You Believe? Can’t be answered by anybody really– it is too broad and vague. But by asking What do you mean? You get them to clarify– you get them to move closer to where they really want to go. And you begin to get to the heart of the matter that they want to know about.

Believe me this is a huge step forward. I know plenty of UUs who when asked What do You Believe? Say something like:

- we need not believe alike to love alike. Or,
- we don’t have beliefs in common. Or,

- our religion isn't about beliefs, it is about behavior. Or,
- we don't have religious beliefs in common, we share a constellation of values.

What? Your questioner asks themselves? What's that supposed to mean?

Those answers can mean something to many of us but utterly baffles an ordinary person— particularly if they're orthodox. I would say none of those statements are very helpful to your questioners, and in fact— aren't really true.

It's like you go to the zoo, see a strange animal and ask the nearby zoo keeper: what's that? Oh, they say— “That's a tapir. You know, it's 'any one of several species of large odd-toed ungulates with a long prehensile upper lip.’” Huh?

That answer means something to the zookeeper but it only baffles the ordinary person. Similarly, when we are asked: What do You Believe? And we answer something that is difficult to understand and doesn't really seem to answer what the questioner had in mind— then the questioner becomes suspicious— and rightly so.

“See Edith! I told you it was a cult. They won't tell you what they believe!” Ha ha! I knew it!

So, when we get to what UUs believe in a conversation, first we have to set the context, because otherwise the person will likely assume an orthodox, rather than a liberal context.

And until they “get” the context, the actual content of the answer may make sense to them.

So, if we have a conversation with someone about Unitarian Universalism, we have to start with context. Then we can get to content. This is rule #1 in Reverend Daniel's Top Secret Strategy to Explain Unitarian Universalism: We are the opposite of stereotypical orthodoxy.

Take all the dogmatic parts of orthodoxy, spin them 180 degrees, and you have Unitarian Universalism. Voilà!

Orthodoxy in its extreme form says—

- The present day is smoke & mirrors, it's all about the hereafter
- You should memorize the prophets, it's all about getting history
- Our creed alone is a snapshot of Eternal Truth, and everyone else is totally wrong.
- Faith, obedience, intolerance of infidels, and strict adherence to rules is everything.
- Acceptance of religious authority is paramount to salvation
- A single scripture, divinely inspired, and with no errors or doubt is the rock of faith
- You are likely a depraved sinner in the hands of an angry god, deserving only of eternal torment.

That's what orthodoxy says. Unitarian Universalism says – pretty much the opposite.

Orthodoxy assumes that the purpose and function of religion is to explain— once and for all time— with absolute invincible authority— things known only through faith. The whole point of religion— in this view— is to answer life's questions that can't be answered with the scientific method.

Questions like: what happens to our personality after we die? Who made the world? Why is there good and evil? What must I do to earn salvation? Are there angels? Demons? What are they like? Is our life pre-destined? Do we have free will?

Orthodoxy says it has definitive answers to the questions. The answers have been around for a long time, the answers are unchanging, and they are True with a capital T. All you have to do is accept the answers.

So guess what Unitarian Universalism says? You guessed it. Pretty much the opposite.

Where orthodoxy says the purpose of religion is to explain matters of faith definitively, and not only for them but for all of us— Unitarian Universalism says we do not make definitive or creedal those matters known only through faith. Definitely not for ourselves, and certainly not for other people.

Telling this to an orthodox person is like saying: “Oh that? That's a tapir. You know, it's 'any one of several species of large odd-toed ungulates with a long prehensile upper lip.’” Huh?



If the purpose of religion is to conclusively decide for everyone and for all time things known only through faith, then how can there be a religion which says— pretty much the opposite? If we don't have creedal beliefs about the afterlife— which virtually every other religion has— what do we believe? Are there any "common beliefs" among us?

Oh yes, yes there are. Now this gets pretty interesting. I mean— after all— we have UUs in our congregations who, in their practice or primary belief— espouse Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Paganism, and a few other choices.

What possible beliefs could those people have in common? This concept even throws UU ministers. Some of my colleagues in the past have said we don't have common beliefs, we're a federation of faiths, or that we share not beliefs but a constellation of values.

I don't buy it. I grew up UU. I grew up with UU adults who— when they talked about religion— looked and sounded a lot alike to me. They may tell themselves we don't share beliefs in common, but that's not my experience of them.

I'll just pick one UU belief to illustrate. I think all UUs, whether self-described as Unitarian Universalist, or who identify with Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, or Pagan orientations would still affirm that we find religious truth in many scriptures not one.

This is huge! The world's religions, with the possible exception of Hinduism and a few others, the world's religions are based on the idea that there is a single scripture which is authoritative for all humankind, whether those humans buy into it or not.

The affirmation that Unitarian Universalists find religious truth in many scriptures is itself a religious proposition that most of the world does not share with us.

Because our fundamental outlook on religion is so different from the rest of the world's it behooves us to be able to satisfactorily explain it. I hope I've give you some ideas this morning.

It's a lot of stuff we've gone over. Let's do a recap.

- 1) If people ask you, "What do You Believe?" Answer with: what do you mean? What do you really want to know?
- 2) Remember that (a) most people have never heard of Unitarian Universalism, and (b) most people probably assume that all religion is orthodox religion, so,
- 3) If they already know what orthodoxy is, but don't know UU, then you can explain you can take all the dogmatic parts of orthodoxy, spin them 180 degrees, and you have Unitarian Universalism. Voilà!
- 4) As an absolute last resort, you can always— bring them to church!

Ours is a religion where we say: roots hold me close, wings set me free. At first glance, it doesn't make sense, it doesn't fit in with orthodox ideas about religion: roots hold close, wings set free? How can that be?

Well, let's sing it shall we? Spirit of Life, #123.