

# *And You Call That A Religion*

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**October 17, 1993**

Last April, I interrupted my sabbatical briefly and returned to Summit to conduct a memorial service for Dr. Jacob Trapp. While I was in town, the church had its first hearing before the Summit Board of Adjustment. For those of you who are new to the congregation, or who have more important things to remember, I should explain that for several years, now, we have been seeking permission to improve our religious education facilities at Unitarian House, on the corner of Whitredge Road and Summit Avenue. Because our presence on that corner represents what is called a "non-conforming use" according to the language of the town's zoning regulations, it has been necessary for us to wend our way through the arcane labyrinths of Summit's small but amazing effective bureaucracy. In the process, we have met with neighbors, and city officials and lawyers and engineers and architects, we have drawn and redrawn the plans, we have offered proposals and counter proposals, and unavoidably, we have spent a great deal of money. In April, we were finally to be heard by the Board of Adjustment, for the first time.

Since I was in town, our attorney asked that I make a brief presentation to the Board. He asked me to describe the nature of Unitarian Universalism, recount the history of our movement, give a profile our membership, and explain our program. It was a daunting task, for I realized I would be tempted to tell the Board more than they ever wanted to know, and that in resisting that temptation, I might well not tell them enough to satisfy their need to understand us. Nonetheless, I worked to try to describe our religious history and our institutional life in a way that would be useful to the Board as it sought to understand the impact of our proposal upon the surrounding area.

At the conclusion of my remarks, the members of the Board asked a few polite questions of clarification, and then the interested citizens in the audience were given an opportunity to ask their questions of clarification. One man obviously could contain himself no longer. He exploded with a question. As I remember it, he wanted to know if he had heard correctly: "You have no creed, you have no doctrine to which you all subscribed, you have no denominational structure to which you are responsible, you have no bishop who has authority to discipline you, and could you call that a religion?" I took a deep breath and prepared to respond, when the Chair of the Board of Adjustment ruled the question out of order, reminding us that the purpose of the hearing was not to define what constituted a religion, but rather to explore what the congregation proposed to do on the corner of Summit and Whitredge and how that might impact upon the community.

In some ways, it occurred to me that the Board had just ruled out of order the most interesting and perhaps the most central issue of the evening. The truth is, regardless of what zoning regulations say, in every time and in every place, Unitarian Universalist

Congregations *always* represent a non-conforming usage, and the way we govern ourselves and the way we regard creedal and institutional authority are part and parcel of that non-conforming usage.

American Unitarianism is rooted in the history of the English Reformation and the Puritan revolt against the half-way reform of the Anglican church. The Puritans were among those groups which refused to conform to the worship patterns of the Church of England, or to the authority of the Bishops of the Church of England. They were among those radical religious communities who came to be known as non-subscribing, and non-conforming. It was to escape the pressures to conform to conventional patterns, and to accepted authority that they embraced self-imposed exile in the wilderness of New England, where they sought to create a church which was pure and undefiled, a religious community which would be as a city set upon a hill, an example for all who encountered it.

In establishing their churches in New England, the Puritans saw no need for creeds. It was clear to them that no rational people would ever choose to come to the wilderness of Massachusetts, except they be impelled by an irresistible desire for a religion which was pure and honest. In the place of creeds, they created covenants between themselves and their God, pledging themselves to live together in peace, to seek the right, and to live according to truth as God gave them to understand the truth. While they believed that the scriptures contained a revelation of the will of God, they also believed that human understanding of that revelation was never complete. In the famous Puritan affirmation, they believed "that new light ever waits to burst forth to enlighten the mind ."

If they were suspicious of creeds, they were even more suspicious of ecclesiastical authorities. They had searched the scriptures for evidence of institutional patterns in the early church, and could find there no basis for church hierarchies--for bishops, or popes, or councils, or synods. They believed that each individual congregation was the church, possessing in itself complete and total religious authority, including the authority to choose and ordain its own ministers, to admit or expel its own members, to establish its own programs and patterns of worship. They believed that churches should cooperate for the common good, that they should offer each other advice and encouragement and constructive criticism, but that no institutional structure should have authority over the local congregation.

It was along these lines that the Puritan churches in New England developed through the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century. When the first great religious revival burst upon the land, calling for spiritual renewal with a frenzy and fanaticism which shook many established churches, the response of many was to call for the creation of creeds within the churches to ensure the orthodoxy of ministers and lay-people alike and to call for ecclesiastical structures which might discipline any churches or ministers who failed to meet the standard of orthodoxy.

A number of churches, those that considered themselves liberal, resisted this drive for conformity. They refused creeds, feeling that their older, more inclusive, albeit somewhat

ambiguous, covenants were perfectly sufficient, and insisting that they would not compromise the autonomy of the local congregation and the responsibility of that congregation for its own life and faith and commitment. In the end, these liberal churches would separate from the Congregational establishment of Massachusetts, and would form the nucleus of the American Unitarian Association.

In a parallel development, the early Universalist churches had absorbed much of the spirit, if not the doctrine of the revivals which followed the great awakening. The Universalists came into being without any ecclesiastical institutions, without any educated clergy, with only a great idea born of a personal conviction of the ultimate harmony of all things with God. They, like the revivalists were much interested in evoking in those around them a burning sense of the nearness of the holy, a mystical sense of the unity of all. They did not have time to build ecclesiastical hierarchies; they did not have the inclination to build creedal statements. They called people to listen to their own hearts, to heed their own experience, to hear the voice of reason within them and discover there all the evidence they would need of the inescapable love of God. And so from the outset, like their Unitarian cousins, the Universalists were suspicious of creeds and hostile toward ecclesiastical hierarchies.

These are the traditions out of which Unitarian Universalism has emerged, traditions which are innately hostile to ecclesiastical hierarchies and suspicious of any formulation of words which purports to tell people what they ought to believe. (It has been said that this is why Unitarian Universalists do not sing better--we are always reading ahead to see if we agree with the words of the hymn.) We stand in the center of the long and honored tradition of the non-conformist religions. We will not be bound by a creed; nor will we allow any institutional authority to dictate to our congregations. Whatever else may be said of us, we always represent a non-conforming usage.

This serves to create a very different approach to religious questions and particularly to questions of religious authority. It is not that we are free to do anything we like and believe anything we please. Rather, our freedom from creedal restraints and from institutional authority imposes upon us a different kind of discipline. Ours must be a religion of personal integrity and self-discipline maintained within the bounds of intentional, voluntary community.

For us the question is not do you believe what the church teaches, but rather what does your experience and your understanding and your values impel you to believe? Given what you believe how are you required to live and make choices in the world? And given who you are and what you believe and what you choose to do with your life, how do you relate to a community of people who share some, but not all of the positions which shape your religious identity and who, therefore, are sometimes supportive and sometimes challenging and on occasion, critical? For us the central religious affirmation centers not upon creeds, nor liturgies, nor affiliational labels, but rather on who you are, who you want to become, how you live in the world, and how we can create institutions which both support and challenge us as we struggle to create lives of integrity and meaning and purpose.

This means that the content of our religious lives will not conform to the patterns which are familiar in other churches. We are not in the business of proclaiming the truth. We are not in the business of preaching a revelation delivered once to the saints, but, following the advice of one of our greatest prophets, Ralph Waldo Emerson, we are convinced that all of life, all of being contains a revelation if we but learn to listen and be open. We insist, with our Puritan ancestors that "new truth is ever waiting to break forth," and our responsibility is to open ourselves to truth so that we may recognize its emergence.

Central to our religious life is another text which has a long history among us: "Test all things; hold fast to that which is true." This has created a religious style which challenges all kinds of orthodoxies--religious, political, social, economic. Among us, there is no truth so sacred it cannot be questioned; there is no question so heretical it cannot be asked; there is no answer so obvious that it cannot be challenged. There is among us a recognition that human formulations are limited and finite and subject to revision, that "new times make ancient good uncouth," and that even the most powerful and enduring insights need to be reexamined, reevaluated, reformulated if they are to retain their power and not become meaningless, ritualized formulas.

Our congregations exist as communities of people who have come together, not to witness to some agreed upon truth, established by the authority of a larger institution, but rather to support each other in the effort to discover and define those truths which give shape and meaning to our lives, to explore the implications of those truths for the ways we live together and interact with the larger world, to challenge each other, lest we mistake enthusiasm for truth and fall victim to fanaticism. Our congregations exist as communities of people who take their search for truth seriously enough to apply what we have discovered to the larger world and to challenge the uncritical acceptance of conventional wisdom which masquerades as thinking in so many areas of our common life. Our congregations exist as communities of people who seek ways to help our children to acquire the skills which will enable them to live lives of self-reflective awareness and integrity. Our congregations exist as communities of people who see in all things hidden reckonings and who seek to understand their personal journeys as part of the process which is life and death and the universe itself.

Central to our non-conformist nature is a recognition that in this kind of religious community there will not be uniformity of opinion or practice. The more important a question is, the more likely there will be disagreement and divergence. We are committed to embracing that disagreement, for we see in it an opportunity for greater insight and fuller understanding. If I can add to my understanding of the world something of your understanding of the world the range of possibilities open to me is increased. That does not mean that with time we will all come to a consensus about the world or how to live in it. It does mean that we may gain a broader understanding of why people make the choices they make, and we may discover that common humanity which underlies all our diversity, and makes it possible for us to care for each other, even as we disagree and sometimes disapprove.

I can still hear the voice of my questioner at the meeting last April: "And you call that a religion?" My answer is an emphatic "yes!" The term "religion," contrary to popular opinion is not rooted in a concern for the nature of reality, or an affirmation about God. Rather, it is rooted in a concern for human community. The term derives from the Latin word, "religio," which some etymologists suggest means to bind together or to bind back. Religion, then is a force which binds the human community, which relates it to its past, and by extension, suggests something of its future. By that understanding, we are clearly a religion.

We are not bound together by agreement on a creed which establishes the boundaries of truth and right. We are not bound by obedience to ecclesiastical hierarchy. We are not bound by a consensus concerning the nature of reality. Rather, in keeping with the tradition of our non-conforming heritage, we are bound by an implicit covenant we have made with each other.

Here, in this place, we have pledged to seek truth, to support each other in that search, to share what truth we find, to challenge each other to define what it means to live a life of integrity in terms of that truth as we are given to understand it, to remain open to the differing visions of others, that our own understanding may be broadened and deepened. Here in this place, we have pledged to measure our vision of truth against the experience of those who have walked this path before us and against our dreams for those who will follow after us. Here in this place, we have pledged to remain in fellowship, even when we do not agree, even when we cannot find a common path, trusting that in time, our paths may converge. Here we have pledged to value integrity and honesty and openness above conformity and certainty and security.

We are a religious community, for we are bound together in covenant. That covenant we have made with one another, is redrawn each time a new person enters our community. That covenant joins us in a community which embraces all who will enter it, a community which cares even for those who choose not to enter it, a community which extends back beyond the time we can remember and forward into a future beyond our imagination. That covenant makes us responsible for ourselves, for each other and for our common world.

Yes, my friend, I do call that a religion. But be assured, whatever Boards of Adjustment or anyone else may conclude, we shall always represent an unconventional usage, for we do firmly believe that "new truth is ever waiting to break forth" and we unhesitatingly accept the challenge to "test all things, and hold fast that which is true" and we do firmly trust that, in the words of Hosea Ballou "if we agree in...love, no disagreement can do us any harm and if we do not [agree in love] no other agreement can do us any good." That makes of us a different and peculiar people, with an unconventional stance toward the world and our place in it.