

A Universalist Catechism

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For

All Souls Unitarian Universalist Community

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We universalists pride ourselves on our tolerance, our willingness to offer our hearts, our heads, our hands, our shoulders, our respect and our love to anyone, regardless of their race, their ethnic or cultural background, their politics, their beliefs, their faith, their gender or sexual orientation, as long they are willing to treat us similarly. We know we have not always been perfect in expressing this tolerance, but it is our common ideal, and our lapses bother us and help us to improve.

So dedicated are we to this ideal of tolerance that we are often reluctant to express our religious beliefs for fear that we might be misinterpreted as challenging someone else's belief. The result is that UU's are often lampooned as not really believing anything.

What's odd is that UU's on the whole often fall short of their ideal of tolerance when it comes to political beliefs. We tend to be far to the left on the political spectrum, liberal politically as well as religiously. Our conversations on politics, especially when we are by ourselves, display little of the respect and tolerance for nay-sayers, that is, conservatives, that we accord to those who differ from us on religious matters. Indeed on those topics UU's are often arrogant, intolerant and dismissive.

Could it be that the lampooners are correct: we share strong political opinions that come out in political discussion, but we don't, as UU's, share any deep religious beliefs. Is Unitarian Universalism not a religion, but merely a PAC, a political action committee?

1. Unitarian Universalist Principles

But that's not true, you may respond: we all believe the in the Unitarian Universalist Principles:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

I indeed believe that those principles are important. They are essential to support the interaction among people with radically different political and religious beliefs. But they are not **religious** principles, though we might strive to adhere to them religiously. They answer none of the questions that seem so crucial to other religions. They are, for the most part, democratic principles, that is, political principles. And though we might justly be proud of them, they merely reinforce the opinion that Unitarian Universalism is merely a political action committee.

2. What Universalists Believe

Under this roof, and the roofs of all UU churches, we find Christians and Jews, Hindus and Taoists, Wiccans and Atheists, and everything around and in between. Is our political practice of religious tolerance the only thing that keeps such opposing beliefs in close proximity? Or is there an underlying, unexpressed religious commonality that attracts them together?

Today I want to explore and try to articulate such a religious foundation for universalism. (Here I mean universalism with a small 'u', a faith, not a religion; and I certainly do not speak for the Unitarian Universalist Association.)

I will express this foundation in the form of a catechism, a set of statements of belief, my belief. I will explain each belief, showing how each statement fits in our religious landscape, and why I think it is a part of our common faith. I will offer you an opportunity to state your agreement or disagreement.

You may disagree with me, and that's OK. These are not dogmas upon which your proper membership in this church, or my respect for you depend. If you do not now believe these statements, then they provide a foundation for a challenging and worthwhile dialog between us. Maybe after such a dialog you or I or both of us will change our minds. Maybe we will find a way to restate these beliefs so that we both can accept them.

2.1. Choice

The first of these beliefs concerns our ability to choose.

I believe that you and I choose what happens, we have the power of choice.

You and I make choices that influence the course of our world; they have consequences.

Now clearly our plans “aft gang aley,” as Robbie Burns noted in his poem “To a Mouse.” [\[http://www.worldburnsclub.com/poems/translations/554.htm\]](http://www.worldburnsclub.com/poems/translations/554.htm) Things often don’t happen the way we intend. But since all of us are simultaneously making our own individual choices, and since at the same time all living things are selecting, however consciously or unconsciously, among the options available to them, and since all the dynamic processes of nature are unfolding themselves in complex and often chaotic ways, unpredictability is what we should expect. We do not as individuals determine the exact details of the future, but we influence it. What happens comes about in part because of the choices we make. We are all ***co-creators*** of the future.

Note that this belief locates the universalist in one dimension of the religious spectrum. What happens is not written, not by God nor by Satan nor by the Fates nor by subatomic particles nor by chemistry nor by our neurons. We can’t blame any of these for the mess we see. We have been given choice, in the hope that we will learn to use it well. We are all ***co-creators*** of this world, and are all responsible for it.

If you agree, please repeat after me:

I believe that my choices, and yours, co-create this world.

2.2. Responsibility

The second universalist belief has to do with my personal responsibility:

Because my actions have co-created the world as it is, I am responsible for it.

No, I am not the only one. You and you and everyone else contributed to this world. Perhaps someone else is more culpable than I for specific ills of the world; perhaps they acted with deliberate intent to cause harm. But in the final judgement, when it is asked why this happened, I must step up and admit, "I am responsible." I tolerated a system that made such harm possible, even likely. I did not do enough to prevent it.

It is, I admit, hard to know what to do. This is a complex and largely chaotic world, where the consequences of our actions are hard to predict. On the other hand, I know from many too many retrospective looks at my behavior, that my actions resulted in harm that I should have foreseen, had I been more attentive to the needs and fears of others.

This belief in personal responsibility also locates the universalist in a dimension of the religious spectrum. You and I are not living out the purpose of some inscrutable God. We are not mere pawns of the gods in some grand game between good and evil. We are not mere meaningless motes caught up in a cataract of cause, chaos or chance. We are players. We choose our goals, our strategies, our tactics and our plays. And by our plays, together we have brought about this.

I am responsible. *Mea culpa. Mea summa culpa.*

If you agree, please repeat after me:

I acknowledge and accept my responsibility for this world.

2.3. Sin

The third universalist belief has to do with sin:

I believe that people must overcome their innate sinfulness to make the world better.

War, rape, theft, starvation, medical care denied, education denied, justice denied. How is it that this world, wrought from our choices, is beset by so much evil? Now don't get me wrong. There is love and beauty and tenderness and joy, in abundance. But it doesn't go far enough.

The classical *problem of evil* addresses the question of how a perfectly good and all-powerful god could have allowed the world to be so evil. One answer to the problem is that evil is the result of free will. Evil exists because people choose evil ends. As all students of the philosophy of religion know, the free will *theodicy*, i.e., the free will explanation of evil doesn't explain the *evils* of natural catastrophe and death. But perhaps we should be careful what we ask for. Science tells us that death is essential for evolution: without death as the scythe of natural selection, we would not be here to ask these questions.

Be that as it may, because universalists acknowledge the efficacy of choice, we must confront this modern problem of evil: how is it that people with the collective power to bring about a better world, settled for this one?

The answer, in part, lies in the fact is that we don't always act with the good of the world, the good of all, as our primary goal. We act out of lust, gluttony, greed, laziness, wrath, envy and pride, the so-called *seven deadly sins*. Although we evolved as a social species, although we survived only because we learned effective techniques of living in groups, that biological and cultural apparatus did not replace our older evolutionary heritage of selfish behavior. The seven, or seventeen or 666, deadly sins are manifestations of that older heritage, fundamental, self-protective tendencies, which automatically present themselves as considerations in each of our choices. Overriding those tendencies with the *newthink* of social responsibility is difficult at best. Deciding what course of action by each of us is best for all of us, is a complex and overwhelming task, especially when we often disagree about what outcome would be best for all of us. The doctrine that *the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few*, comes from fiction, not evolution. And since the outcome often depends on each of us *doing the right thing*, contrary to what might seem the best for us individually, it is not to be unexpected that we fall short of our hopes.

This inherent tendency to choose self over family, tribe, nation, humanity or world, is our weakness, our handicap, in bringing about the world we want. It is our natural, our original sin. To overcome it, we must acknowledge and confront it, constantly. We must tell ourselves that we can do better.

If you agree, please repeat after me:

I acknowledge and confront my original sin.

2.4. Hell on Earth

The fourth universalist belief has to do with the price of sin:

I believe that our sinfulness produces a world that won't work.

Many religions threaten sinners with an eternity of torments in a Hell in the afterlife; others, with an eternity of rebirths into the sufferings of life on Earth. Few believe that sin is adequately punished in this life; most seem to argue that without the prospect of punishment after death, there would be no motivation to act morally while we live.

As a universalist, I suggest a different message. I believe with Plato that the price paid by the unjust is the life they lead, and that only the just man can be truly happy. I believe that a life full of mutual respect, trust and love is so much better than a life without it, that to choose a life of sin, that is, selfishness, and thereby deprive myself of love, of the harmony that results from trusting, respectful relationships with those about me, is equivalent to volunteering to go to Hell.

What I suggest is that sinful values suboptimize the system of life. If I act out of pride or greed or rage or any of the other deadly sins, I am attempting to gain what I would not otherwise obtain. And what I get comes from a zero-sum game: my profits result in someone else's loss. They inevitably skew the system to favor a particular subsystem, me. Such a bias is always visible to other people in the system, especially those who incurred the loss, who will always react with their own attempts to bias the system in their own favor. These conflicting attempts create a turbulence that results in a dysfunctional system in which no one is satisfied. Everyone is alienated from everyone else, as well as from the system as a whole. In Shakespeare's words, "All are punished!"

Hell is not a punishment that we should fear will be levied by a just God or a just universe upon our death. Hell is the natural consequence of our thinking, of our behavior here and now. Sinful thoughts exclude love, and remove us from the only true opportunity for joy in this life.

Thus on this dimension of religion, I agree with those who say that sin is punished. I may disagree with some on how and when.

If you agree, please repeat after me:

I believe that the Price of Sin is the Hell of dysfunctionality on Earth.

2.5. Salvation

The fifth universalist belief has to do with salvation:

I believe that people can find salvation from their sins through apology and forgiveness.

Many religions promise salvation, forgiveness for sin. Most religions proclaim that adherence to their true faith is a necessary condition for that forgiveness, that grace. Their descriptions of that state of grace typically take the form of an opposite of their concept of divine perdition. Those who believe in Hell in the afterlife for the unforgiven, talk of a Heaven for the saved; those who believe in an eternity of rebirth, talk of an end to the cycle and absorption into the one.

I on the other hand have a different goal. My concern is whether we can find grace, salvation, in the here and now, in this life. I believe that such a grace depends on our ability to forgive ourselves, both individually and collectively.

The challenge is that a sin committed is a trust broken. When I sin against you, I break trust with you and with myself. I fail both of our expectations about my behavior. And while you can learn to avoid me and my untrustworthiness, I cannot. I am aware of all my mistakes, and can easily conclude that I am unworthy of forgiveness, of trust

Part of the key to salvation, to a restoration of that loving harmony among mutually respecting people, is forgiveness. I must be willing to forgive you, and to forgive myself. But how is that possible given our loss of trust, for each other and for ourselves? It is possible only on the condition of repentance, atonement, apology. I must apologize for my sins; you must apologize for yours.

Now, by apology, I do not mean uttering the words “I’m sorry,” as in “Gee, I’m sorry you’re not feeling well.” Apology requires confession, a frank admission that we have done wrong. It requires restitution, an honest attempt to undo the harm wrought by our actions. And it requires correction, a firm commitment to act appropriately in the future. Confession, restitution and correction are essential to an apology that can rebuild the trust required for harmonious relationships.

Once a full apology has been made, forgiveness is the next step. I must forgive you and I must forgive myself. Not to forgive the truly penitent is a sin unto itself. To let residual anger at you or loathing at myself get in the way of forgiveness, is a new assault upon us. It reinforces the dysfunctionality of our relationship. Apology and forgiveness are the only bridges across the angry sea that separates us.

Thus like religions world-wide, universalism offers the hope of grace, of salvation. It opens the door to the cells we have put ourselves in, mistaking irresponsibility for freedom, separation from others for independence.

If you agree, please repeat after me:

I believe that apology and forgiveness make salvation available to you, and to me, in this life.

2.6. Love

The sixth universalist belief has to do with Love:

I choose to act as though your goals are equal to mine.

This is the essence of Christian love, that is, the love of neighbor that Jesus commanded of us.

If you agree, please repeat after me:

I choose to love you and everyone else as equal, divine co-creators.

2.7. God

The seventh universalist belief has to do with God:

I choose to act as though the world is a living whole of which I am a contributing part.

Ethical Ecosystem.

If you agree, please repeat after me:

I am a contributing part of a worthwhile whole.

This I believe.

Namaste!