

HOW I SEE THEOLOGY

The Rev. Diana Heath

We are not the kind of church that will agree to a single set of beliefs. Neither are we a newcomer on the modern religious scene. We are a religious movement that dates our history before the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

What was our most significant contribution to these big changes in Western orthodoxy? It was the Western World's first Edict of Religious Toleration, which occurred in 1557.

It was the work of the only Unitarian king in history, King John Sigismund. It was renewed in 1563, as the Act of Religious Toleration and Freedom of Conscience. The key line read:

“No person shall be reviled for their religion by anyone.”

That single line is foundational to Unitarianism as it has grown and changed through the centuries. It appeared in America when it was a colony. After the Revolutionary War with Britain, our indigenous American Unitarianism [though it would not bear that name until later], offered a needed balance to the Puritan's piety.

Sometime later, we separated from our religious cousins, the Congregationalists, when each parish could vote to be Congregational or Unitarian. There are still complaints from the great, great, grandchildren of Congregationalists in New England, that the Unitarians 'stole' their churches and kept the communion silver.

The Unitarians also kept the majority of the literary folk, the scientists, intellectuals, social progressives and social activists of the 19th century.

My family was Southern Baptist, by inheritance, in a large city. City Baptist churches are different than those in rural Baptist churches. Our pastor had been a Navy chaplain, and was a thoughtful man, who did not thunder about being lost, and needing to be saved. There was room to consider exciting new ideas, and also ideas my friends -in college - were discussing and shared with me. So, I didn't have a strong emotional reaction against the religion of my childhood.

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Rather I experienced the contradictions intellectually - I think of it now as “cognitive dissonance” - - then, I just thought “This doesn’t make sense. I don’t experience what they say I’m supposed to, and it doesn’t add up. There must be other ways, not just one.” So, some friends said I might like the Unitarian Church, and, only 15 years old, I went with them, and immediately felt I had found a religious community where I could learn and grow...and the adults didn't 'shoo' me away.

It was in the late 1950’s, when the Unitarians were still reflective of the “Enlightenment Faith” - still considered elitist because of their education, their vocabularies (big words), and intellectualism. Visitors sometimes said how intimidating it felt, because everyone was so smart, they felt they could never fit in. In New England, especially in the neighborhood of Boston, Unitarians were still called “God’s frozen people” and their meeting houses “the refrigerators with a steeple” because of its intellectual and rational bent.

The Unitarian Chapel at the University of Chicago had, rather than a steeple, a weather vane - because, it was said, rather than “being saved”, the Unitarians wanted to know which way the wind was blowing. The Unitarian Church in my hometown, was a beacon of hope for me, because I felt respected, not corrected, with my questions and doubts.

Then, in the early 60’s the Unitarians and the Universalists became a merged denomination. Now, in a merger, similar to a marriage or partnering, the identity of each becomes somewhat blurred or changed in the resulting relationship: the “we”. Even though there were many similarities between them, there were also differences that still are being worked through today. “Identity issues.”

We are still urging our members, in explaining ourselves to others, come up with a positive affirmation of our religious movement, rather than only negative denials of what you don’t have to believe, in order to belong. It is confusing! Many of our churches have identity issues, also. “Are we a valid religious alternative, or an alternative **to** religion that meets on Sundays, drinks coffee and has interesting discussions?”

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Say, one part of the congregation wishes to be focused one way, another part wants another identity, and others “something more”, showing us that congregation is struggling with the “who” of “who we are.” Although those not in our tradition find us much more alike than different, UUs visiting other UU congregations will comment that this one was “too traditional”, that one “too 60's ”! Ah! The 60's.....

It was in the 60's, during sweeping social changes that women began to demand, not ask, that we be admitted to seminaries. Starr King seminary has - to remind us how it was - a framed response to a woman's application for admission - still in the early 60's, advising the woman to seek another career, that “no church would call a woman as their minister”. Still, we came, and graduated, as did our African American colleagues, gay and lesbian colleagues, those over 40, 50, even 60 years of age, those with disabilities - sisters and brothers in ministry.

Women have greatly changed the face of our Unitarian Universalist ministry in the last 50 years.

And in my life? I was a young mother with 4 children, and a strong call to ministry. When my 4th and youngest child entered school, I finished my college degree, and went straight through seminary, chaplaincy in a large state mental hospital, got a clinical degree in pastoral counseling, did a church internship, and studied science and religion at Oxford University on a Rockefeller Foundation Grant. Working three jobs at times, striving to be an attentive parent, working hard to be better, just to seem as good enough, my hope was that I, and the other UU women students, would actually be settled by a church.

In my early '30's, I attended a large, intellectually and academically focused seminary - filled with mostly young, pietistic Methodists seminarians. It was a large liberal seminary, with three Unitarian professors on the faculty, and many outstanding liberal and moderate religious scholars teaching there. My time in theological school was full of irony.

What I found so interesting in class, felt threatening to many of the young seminary students - - like the seminary was

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trying to take their faith away – teaching biblical *criticism* (!) This was an approach to understanding religion they had never heard of in their small Bible colleges.

During orientation, the most valuable thing I heard, and have always remembered, was told us by a Professor of Church History – Mr. Babcock. His welcome speak sounded more like an introduction to Marine boot camp!

Babcock said, “We don’t know how many of you will actually finish these four years, and graduate – but that is your job, not ours. Our job is to help you, by the time you do graduate, tell the *ROT* from the not-*ROT*.”

He was speaking of theology, of claims about religion, and systems of “personal” belief just then becoming visible. We were to learn how to take theologies apart as systems, and then assess if they hung together, or if they contradicted each other at their roots....if their beliefs were not only truthful, but ultimately meaningful to more than one person – how **do** you tell the rot from the “not-rot”...?

I breezed through biblical literature, taking honors, comparative religions, religious history - It became very aggravating to some of the young Methodist students (men) that a Unitarian woman! should make better grades than they, and especially, have the nerve to take honors in Bible! Was God punishing them, it seemed like they were asking themselves?

But, I wasn’t worrying about the beliefs. I treated the Bible as fascinating literature – which also contained some rot. I learned that much of it was historicized mythology...and mythologized history. It was interesting, even fun.

Fun, that is, until, my two years of Systematic Theology. That’s when I got my comeuppance! Having a very vague “belief system” as a new UU, and most of what I identified was counting off things I *didn’t* believe, made unpacking what they called a “theological system” very difficult!

I would argue with the theologians on the faculty that I couldn’t see how I could understand something that I just didn’t believe, and which didn’t make any sense to me. Schubert Ogden, a leading process theologian, would just blink at me and say it could be done.

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I needed to keep working at it, he said. In class once, he asked me what my Unitarianism had taught me about 'worship'. I answered that it means to celebrate what one finds of greatest worth. "I find my fountain pen of great worth, so should I worship it?", he shot back. Ooooo - I should have thought longer on that one. And so it went!

There was a requirement to finish the course of study in Systematic Theology, to graduate from the seminary with a Master of Theology degree. We were to write a paper, no less than 20 pages, of our own understanding of a theologian's exposition of his or her interpretation of "the faith". (I didn't say "belief system" - those words came in later, into popular culture, to express the search amongst the ashes of 20th century religion, both Eastern and Western, to find something that made sense of life.)

The enterprise of Theology humbled me, showed me my own deficiencies, my almost *nil* understanding how to take a system of belief apart - including my own - in order to see how *or if* - it hung together, or fell apart. It didn't come together very well, but I turned in a laboriously patched-together paper, and [to the school's relief, I think] passed the course, and graduated.....with a "Master of Theology" degree!

I would go to the Professor's office, and in frustration, ask time and again: "But how can I *understand* something which I don't believe?" The answer was the same. "Then, what would you put in place of what you 'don't believe', name it, and argue it in your own statement of what you believe.?"

Slowly, I began to understand, you can't build a religion around 'negative denials' - which was characteristic of the Unitarians & Universalists, two denominations newly merged, that were, and still are in a process of developing our identity.

Was I a religious Unitarian? I needed a better grasp of historic Unitarian theology, and also Universalist theology, which turned out to be very different than I thought. Especially Universalism. I started reading some original writings and the history of our way of thinking religiously.

So I began. And I found I had quarrels with Universalism, and even some with the Unitarianism I had started out with.

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A lot had happened since merger in 1961. Having no creeds or doctrines, we seemed to throw the baby out with the bath water, in the 1960's and 70's, and embraced therapy and the human potential movements, and most confusing of all – the claims that each UU had their own “belief system”, and their own truth. If you felt uncomfortable with a belief, you could change your beliefs again and again, whether they fit together to make sense, or not. One of the most positive actions we took, however, was participation in the civil rights movements, the peace and justice initiatives, which continue today – faith and action.

Around the 80's and especially the '90's, many UUs in our congregation began to have a vague feeling that something was missing. For many, that turned out to be more spirituality and finding the depths, rather than the shallows, of their religious journey. For others, it was still humanism, others, social action. Our statement of Principles and Sources from which we draw was created, and is even now undergoing some changes by the UUA Commission on Appraisal – but it is a listing of what we believe to be important in being together – not something that particular points to what it means to be a religious Unitarian Universalist.

And, after merger, and having become “issue oriented” our merged denomination declined, losing nearly half its adult members, and in the last 50 years. Claims of ‘growth’ in our movement, were never factual – some years more churches closed than were founded. It has become important to ask ourselves within our congregations, “Are we a religion, or an alternative TO religion?” Are we a viable religious community in which one can deepen and grow spiritually, ethically and intellectually?

I describe our congregations now as “Spiritual Open Spaces” for the free mind, and the free spirit.

One way to put the difference between orthodoxy and the spiritual open spaces of our churches is that traditional religions offer life-preservers, while we offer swimming lessons. Having a fixed belief to which believers attest, the traditionalist is supposed to feel comfort knowing that they,

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and the whole universe rest in the hands of a God, who set the thing in motion, & delivered a manual of operation for the believers. Not for me, however.

But as I said, when I began, we are not the kind of church that will buy a creed or single definition of religion. How can you "do theology" when there isn't one? How can you then put together a covenant of purpose when we gather, that can be described in what is called "an elevator speech"? that tells others what we are about.

We are apt to critique beliefs from other's religions, and rightly so, when the congregations, the communities, show themselves to be oppressing, damaging of human trust, excluding whole groups of people who do not share their belief. We seldom "critique" our own beliefs or assumptions, because either we don't quite know how, or don't want to "offend" others with whom we find community.

But there can also be such a thing as "the tyranny of the minority", when we have not adopted healthy boundaries that allow us to agree or disagree in our congregations that hold the discussion above the level of "You're wrong!". We UUs need to keep mindful in voicing our strong negative feelings about some beliefs we abhor, have a strong emotional reaction to, lest we are heard as saying that others' humanity or value is less than our own.

Instead, let us think of the sources from which we draw, and how they complete and compliment our beliefs. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles do go on to speak of the many sources and insights from which we draw:

Our Principles speak to living in community, and also to a religious and spiritual life- Not what it must be.... - but where is it to be challenged, deepened, refined? In our congregations. Where is the meaningfulness of that for others, and what is the truth of it?? - In our congregations, we can respectfully learn from one another.

Is there, then, a place for growth and change, and deepening? Our age has seen the least of spiritual guidance. One of the reasons we come together, though, is to hear more than our own voice, and can add, or subtract, or change.

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So – the question comes from our congregations: can I, or we, believe anything we want? Well, Unitarian Universalism is not the freedom to believe anything or nothing. It is the freedom to reason and to feel, as to what the truth of life might be -the ultimate concerns, beyond the mere surface concern – those things which are capable of restoring us from our own mistakes, mis-steps and mis-deeds: and recover concern for others, not just in the shallows, but in the depths of justice and human rights and responsibilities, the freedom to challenge those things which oppress, which threaten to kill off the human goodness of which we are capable, and, it says, structures of evil. [Evil, not as a disembodied puff of smoke, but the things we do to, and against each other.] We do not address our own capability for wrong-doing, although we are practiced at pointing out that of other groups. At least, we can come to understand the contradictions, the tensions within ourselves, which are part of all of the human condition.

Before I conclude with “How I See Theology”, I want to say that the “theological discipline” in its narrowest sense considers questions about a divine being, its existence and nature, how life and especially human life, was brought into being, why the good suffer and the evil seem to flourish.

In its largest sense, however, Theology is a discipline which seeks the meaning and truth of human existence, in terms of ultimate concerns. You can look up the meaning of “ultimate concern” – it is a good place to start. Theology also examines religious claims, & claims to religious truth about the really big questions of human existence.

Now I am coming close to my own theological bias: that we set out in life, from a certain context of givens, the place, the culture, the times we were born into, always wanting to know more than we can know.

I would describe myself as a "reverent agnostic" - someone who sees religious community surviving in human life, because it is able to lift up our universal human passages, put our personal successes and failures in clearer perspective, provide an ongoing conversation about meaning and truth in our lives.

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I learned that it is "rot" to claim something is true, because I believe it, and so do all my friends and neighbors. I've reflected on how my beliefs have changed over the years of my life. Some of my cherished beliefs have been clobbered. We have even been challenged by our own 'cognitive dissonance' as UUs, in terms of our experience, to *think*, and relinquish what no longer fits.

Now, the theological "itch" is both a blessing and a curse - it propels some to make claims that cannot be backed up, and they use power or coercion or false promises of protection from the anxieties, the slings and arrows that are part of all life. It also has led us to people in our lives who showed us paths that were a living fountain, not something poured in concrete - who have taught us, mentored us, passed on wisdom, compassion, passion for a world of peace and justice, a love of beauty, and care for the earth, care for the content of our character and our personhood - and the humility to acknowledge that some parts of life are a mystery - a mystery nearly impossible to put into words, where we sense the experience of a sort of unity with all life.

You may or may not have had what William James so tortuously explains in "The Varieties of Religious Experience" - as "a religious experience", nor need you.

No, we are open - open to the many paths: the Humanist, the Deist, the practice of Buddhist meditation and teachings, the Earth-centered paths, the Atheist, the practice of one of the 12 step programs, the seekers, and the finders - all this and much more. And we will keep our doors open, for we believe this is the way to treat people as people - not problem free, but finding the place, a place of meeting. And you are welcome, as are those who travel after you. And we will learn, and support one another as we grow this new religious way of being and doing.