

As delivered at Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation
Oak Park, Illinois
March 4, 2001

We get a lot of calls everyday. Members and friends and committee chairs call to arrange meetings, get an announcement in the bulletin, conduct the business of the congregation. And we get a lot of calls from the larger community, as well. It's a delight to work with couples planning their weddings here at Unity Temple. Sometimes, and fortunately these times are much less frequent, someone will call to rent the Temple for a memorial service. Those calls are really difficult for me. These people should be doing nothing but grieving and trying to find some comfort and peace and instead we have to talk about rental fees and available ministers. But whether it's a call about a joyous event like a wedding, or a call because of a tragedy or crisis, or just someone calling because they're curious, almost every caller wants to know: What do you believe?

What do we believe? The first question asked in the booklet 100 Questions that Nonmembers Ask about UUism, the first thing under what do UUs believe is "Every individual should be encouraged to develop a personal philosophy of life."

Question number six in the booklet is "Do some UUs have different beliefs than other UUs?" The book answers: They certainly do. They certainly do. Found in today's UU churches, congregations and societies are humanism, agnosticism, atheism, theism, liberal Christianity, neo-paganism and earth spiritualism. Some congregations have a leaning to one of these, liberal Christianity or neo-paganism, for example, but even within those, members and friends believe different things.

So. What do you believe? Do we choose our beliefs cafeteria style? Are we a salad-bar religion? Are we a religion a la carte? On November 30th of last year, Morning Edition's Lynn Neary did a report on "The Changing Face of Religion in America." She talked with Huston Smith, a Methodist man raised in China by missionary parents, who has spent his life studying the great religions of the world. He says that religion gives spirituality traction. It is individual and subjective, it is the cream in the cream puff of life, but when we pick what we like, or what's easy from various religions and leave the hard part behind, what we are doing is worshipping Saint Ego. We are assuming we know what we need. And in an interview in Mother Jones magazine, he said, "What you describe as New Age, and what I call the cafeteria approach to spirituality is not the way organisms are put together, nor great works of art. And a vital faith is more like an organism or work of art than it is like a cafeteria tray." Smith notes that this approach fails to confront the question of evil, and it has failed to produce true heroes like Mother Teresa or the Dalai Lama. At worst, he says, it "can be a kind of private escapism to titillate oneself."

On the other hand, Jack Kornfield, who was trained as a Buddhist monk and is cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society, agrees that we need a deep and true path. It may be Buddhism, Judaism or Christianity, but it may also pull various elements together. What we really need is a foundation of compassion, a level of practice and sacrifice and a sense of community. As people continue to explore,

they will eventually find what works for them. Does that mean we're each the founder of a new religious faith? As we continue to explore, as we search for what works for us individually, do we turn spirituality into our own creative art? I would like to welcome you to the Sect of Toni Maddi. I would like to, but its membership is closed. It has one member, me, and that's plenty. Is this what we believe? Has the growth of spirituality followed the path of the baby-boomers and now as we approach middle age and then old age and death, our narcissism is asserting itself? Perhaps the growth of individual consciousness has reached a point where the old vessels of faith, the established religions, can no longer contain it. Right now, I'm talking about Americans in general. Even within religions, the gap between the official doctrine and the actual belief can be immense. The reasons can be traced to the powerful cultural forces that have been reshaping our lives since the 60s: feminism and rejecting rituals and texts that smack of male bias; LSD and the psychedelic subculture played a role in weakening traditional religion and giving many a sense of a personal mystical union with the divine. Our increased ability to travel and the Information Age have given us a growing exposure to the world's traditions and has brought many close to the more exotic religious beliefs.

Most observers agree that the trend toward combining various beliefs and practices from different sources, although real, is not entirely new. Religions, like people and languages, have often clashed and intermingled. Gods have merged, blurred, switched genders, fallen silent, even died. And in America, this "privatized" attitude toward spiritual practices has always been evident, scholars say, but the impulse may be stronger than in the past.

What we now have is a robust spiritual marketplace. Start surfing the web—there's so much available to you now in your own home. If you feel like going out, though, go to Barbara's Bookstore—just for this exercise; do your buying at Ex Libris—go to Barbara's and look at the selections available. There are sections labeled Mind & Spirit, Philosophy, Psychology—and this section contains a book entitled Soul without Shame and another entitled You Are a Spiritual Being Having a Human Experience—and 3 very large sections labeled Spirituality. This spiritual marketplace perfectly suits our consumer mentality. We can comparison shop for beliefs! In an age where we trust ourselves to put together investment portfolios, why not our own religious portfolio? What do we believe? I have here one of the cards we make available to visitors to Unity Temple. It's entitled "What do Unitarian Universalists believe?"

~ We believe in the freedom of religious expression. All individuals should be encouraged to develop their own personal theology,

and to present openly their religious opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.

~ We believe in the toleration of religious ideas. All religions, in every age and culture, possess not only an intrinsic merit, but also

a potential value for those who have learned the art of listening.

~ We believe in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an

official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.

~ We believe in the never-ending search for Truth. If the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to

the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful and wondrously exciting.

~ We believe in the unity of experience. There is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the

sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.

~ We believe in the worth and dignity of each human being. No idea, ideal or philosophy is superior to a single human life.

~ We believe in the ethical application of religion. Good faith finds completion in social and community involvement

~ We believe in the motive force of love. This governing principle of human relationships always seeks the welfare of others.

~ We believe in the necessity of the democratic process. People should govern themselves.

And the final belief on the card, the final point is where the sect of Toni Maddi meets the sect of Barbara Harrison or the sect of Biff Johnson:

~ We believe in the importance of a religious community. The validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.

We have another brochure available to guests in the foyer. On the back it states what Unitarian Universalism affirms. And these are the first things I tell people when they call and ask "What do you believe?": We affirm that: Creation is too grand and complex to be captured in a narrow creed—we have no dogma. That is why we cherish individual freedom of belief. The blessings of life are available to everyone, not just the Chosen or the Saved. Creation itself is holy, the earth, its creatures, the stars. The sacred, the divine, are made evident not in the miraculous or supernatural, but in the simple and the everyday. Everyone of us is held in Creation's hand, a part of the interdependent cosmic web.

Those are things we, as UUs, believe and affirm. How about as a congregation? Each week we read the covenant together, as we're comfortable. For example, some of us don't believe in God, so we leave that part out. And it's not about what we "believe", it's a covenant we make together. Here at Unity Temple we often hear the Transcendentalists quoted. What about other congregations? What do they believe?

As I mentioned, different congregations may have a different focus or emphasis. The extent to which you hear God mentioned in a Sunday service will vary from one UU congregation to another. There are still liberal Christian congregations—about 20% of UUs call themselves Christians. This liberal Christianity either downplays or dismisses the idea of original sin, they are more flexible in their interpretation of scripture than other, more traditional Christians, and most would reject a literal interpretation of the virgin birth, the miracles of Jesus and the resurrection of Christ. And while UU Christians would accept a symbolic interpretation of these events, most UUs simply view Jesus as one of a number of great moral and ethical teachers who have lived on earth.

There are also UU societies with a nature or earth-centered orientation. From the time of the Transcendentalists of the early 1800s, there have been Unitarians and Universalists who have looked to nature as a primary source of inspiration and revelation. In the 1970s and '80s, growing awareness of ecological crises and the rise of the women's spirituality movement, created a place within UUism for

the organization of the Covenants of Unitarian Universalist Pagans. This group finds continued inspiration in the interdependent web of existence and the earth-centered traditions. These traditions celebrate the sacred circle of life which instructs us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature. As I said, this tradition goes back to the Transcendentalists. Ralph Waldo Emerson called Henry David Thoreau "our pagan".

Because ours is a very humanistically-oriented religion, most UUs regard themselves as humanists in one sense or another, but, like the term God, humanism also means different things to different UUs. Basically, humanism means that we humans are responsible for our destiny for better or worse and we cannot rely on an outside power or deity to determine our individual or collective fate. Humanism is also an affirmation of the power of the human mind and the human spirit. There are both secular and religious humanists. Secular humanists do not believe in any kind of deity; they find little, if any, value in religious language, stories, myths or symbols of any religious tradition.

The religious humanist, while holding to the definition of humanism, does not completely disavow the idea of God. Usually defining God as a power deep within themselves, they also find certain messages or themes in religious stories that provide them with understanding and guidelines for human living. There are both secular and religious humanists within our denomination as well as within our congregation, and we make room for both of them.

We UUs like to joke among ourselves that the only ritual common to our diverse congregations is coffee hour. This self-mockery may reflect the spiritual journeys of our membership. Many of us came to UUism from religions whose rituals had become meaningless or even hateful or destructive.

But we do have rituals that we all celebrate: child dedications, the rite of welcoming new members, weddings and union ceremonies, memorial services to celebrate a life well lived and to provide comfort, coming-of-age ceremonies, chalice ceremonies, and two special rituals that are celebrated in almost all of our 1500 congregations: the flower communion and, one Unity Temple doesn't celebrate, unfortunately, the water service. This is where, at the end of the summer, members of the congregation bring water and stories from their summer trips. The water is blended together in a large bowl. Many congregations then use the water throughout the year in some of the other rituals, like child dedications.

Did you know there is a word for this "religion ... à la carte"? Syncretism is the term for blending rituals and beliefs of different faiths. I pointed out before that this is a very American thing to do. It fits right into our life-style of comparison shopping and building our own investment portfolios, our internet surfing and our views on democracy. George Barna, in his book *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators*, concludes that the reality "is that America is transitioning from a Christian nation to a syncretistic, spiritually diverse society." And look at it: we have Transcendentalism fusing with evangelical Christianity and producing the curious pop theology of the TV show *Touched by an Angel*. The appeal of this show is that this is what a lot of people believe, or at least what they want to be true.

But this fusing of practices is not uniquely American any more than it's uniquely Unitarian. In China, a person's life may be an unconflicted interplay of Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism. Even though

their basic value systems may not always be perfectly aligned, aspects of each faith can be useful in different areas of life, or even in the same area. And even when they are at odds with each other, as Confucianism and Buddhism are at odds with worldly success, these opposites create an enlightened tolerance, a breadth and balance, which are fundamentally important Chinese cultural ideals. Most of the holidays we celebrate in the Western world are blends of different faiths and practices: Halloween, Christmas, Easter, Valentine's Day. If you throw in reading your horoscope that day... Religious critics say that this is like taking bricks from various ancient temples and building a rickety shrine of our own. But I look at it differently.

I believe we may not all be religious, but we are all spiritual. I believe that all of these religions and practices exist as a quiet spiritual stream flowing beneath the more outward discussions, orientations, affirmations and covenants of our liberal religious movement. Within Unitarian Universalism, people may follow different paths.

Imagine a lush forest. Within the forest there are various trails. You might follow the narrow deer path of Taoism through this Unitarian Universalist forest. You might float gently on the wide stream of meditation that runs through the forest. You might enter the forest, take the main trail and then turn off on the first branch in the trail, just following it, going passively, seeing where it will lead you. Perhaps you blaze your own trail cutting through the old growth with a chain saw or perhaps you pass silently through the trees, stepping over fallen branches, gently pushing aside tall plants, enjoying each step as you test the insights of your heart and mind, leaving no path behind you. We're all on a journey through the forest. We're not all on the same path. Perhaps our paths will cross, or even converge. But, as Unitarian Universalists, we all value the journey and respect the path that others choose through these woods, through this interdependent web, through this sacred space.