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**Faithful Non-Believers:
Examining Ritual and Belief in a Unitarian Universalist Congregation**

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Though March 17, 2013 represented my first visit to a Unitarian Universalist church, it didn't feel at all foreign. Growing up in a United Methodist Church, and visiting several other protestant services when I first arrived in Tacoma, it really felt quite familiar. I was greeted at the door and invited to put on a nametag. As I entered the sanctuary, an usher handed me a hymnal and a bulletin, and a kind older woman sat down next to me, introducing herself and asking me questions about where I went to school. Even the prelude, sung by a choir, was a traditional Christian song, "Zion's Walls." With the exception of a few subtle differences, such as the chalice lighting at the beginning, the service mostly felt about the same to me as a traditional protestant service.

There was only one moment on that first day that felt jarringly different than anything I had experienced in my United Methodist Church at home. It occurred during the "Time for All Ages," a time when all the children or "anyone feeling young at heart" were invited to come forward for a special message that was just for them, before being dismissed to Sunday school. While this aspect of a service is typical of a protestant service, what really stood out to me was when the Brooke, the Director of Religious Exploration who was sharing the message that morning, spoke to the children about reconciling the feelings of transcendence she experienced and her trust in science. She said, "I'm an agnostic," and explained that this meant she was

uncertain about her religious beliefs, and expected to keep exploring them for the rest of her life.

What was striking about this was not the fact that Brooke was struggling to reconcile beliefs, or experiences with some sort of transcendent being, with her understanding of science, and natural processes like the Big Bang. This is a typical sentiment in moderate to liberal protestant denominations, and is even present in conservative ones. However, it was the way she claimed this doubt, showcasing these questions to the children as a means of education, even daring to take on the label “agnostic” that really distinguished this moment from any protestant service I’ve ever attended. While mainstream protestant sects accept, even embrace the presence of doubt, it’s always considered an obstacle to be managed or overcome through faith. As Richard, the pastor of this Unitarian Universalist congregation told me, when he growing up in an Episcopalian church, “I was always told that to be good, I needed faith, and I never felt like I had that.”

Indeed, this is a common narrative. Most people in this congregation were raised in other religious traditions, usually protestant sects, but left because they didn’t like the “dogma.” Generally, they are able to identify a number of positive experiences they have had within the church they were raised in. These were not the children who were dragged to church every Sunday; they talk about how they enjoyed the community, stability, and opportunity for reflection. However, at some point, they came to see themselves as not belonging within their church anymore because they did not have the correct beliefs.

The Unitarian Universalist tradition was created through the merging of two protestant sects, the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America; the current Unitarian Universalist Association, however, no longer identifies as Christian (Unitarian Universal Association: 2013). The central importance of orthodoxy that Unitarian Universalists are rejecting is reflective of a very protestant culture, and while many people immersed in this culture take it for granted that faith and religion are practically synonymous, orthodoxy should not be assumed to be a defining factor of religion.

Belief has been central to Christianity since the origins of the religion. Christians identify as “believers,” and define their communities around specific statements of beliefs known as creeds (Ruel 1982: 101). The centrality of belief to this religious tradition percolated into the scholarship of this field. Because the academic study of religion emerged in the predominantly Christian West, many religious theorists have focused on belief as a defining factor of religion. Recently, however, scholars have called attention to the problems of focusing on “belief” as the defining aspect of religion. Anthropologist Malcolm Ruel argues that the way westerners tend to give primacy to what people of other religious traditions believe is problematic because not only is it embedded with the assumption that belief is of central importance in the religious tradition they are evaluating, but also that the way we define “belief” is loaded with our own cultural and religious assumptions (Ruel 1982: 100). Partly due to anthropological studies such as Ruel’s, recent academic work in the study of religion has increasingly focused on not only belief but also practice and community as central aspects of religious traditions.

With an understanding that a focus on belief is a predominantly Christian idea, we can also see within Protestantism a focus on the individual. From its inception, distinguishing features of Protestantism include a justification by faith alone, and by scripture alone. These theologies both gave the individual the authority to communicate directly with God and to interpret the Bible for herself, without having to depend on the clergy.

This paper interrogates how a congregation forms religious community and identity without established beliefs and dogmas, especially with Protestant origins and within the context of a predominantly Protestant nation, which places a high value on “faith” as the defining aspect of religion. I will argue that in this context, ritual is a source of unity. Through these rituals, congregants are encouraged to formulate their own beliefs, emphasizing a “free and responsible search” for truth and meaning. By defining religion in firm opposition to orthodoxy, Unitarian Universalists are giving ultimate theological authority to the lay person, an endeavor that is, in essence, quite Protestant. This allows them to create a religious experience that is fitting and adaptable to their current personal beliefs, which are still, in many ways, quite central to their definition of religion. While rituals are often “homegrown,” originating from the laity of individual congregations, they provide coherence because of the uniformity of the congregants, specifically in regard to race, class, and religious upbringing. This demographic uniformity provides a set of common cultural practices and understandings from which to build these rituals.

Methods

The ethnographic data for this project were gathered beginning in March and ending in July of 2013. The bulk of my research consisted of participant observation at a Unitarian Universalist Church in Tacoma, WA (Bernard 2011: 256-290). I attended services every Sunday, and stayed afterward for the coffee and conversation hour. I took extensive field notes after each service, detailing the content of the worship service and conversations I had with dozens of members. The data collected from these interactions, and observations of the service, is information that I could gather using participant observation that would have been difficult to gather and understand otherwise (Bernard 2011: 265-267). In addition, Russell Bernard explains how participant observation helps the researcher to “understand the meaning of [her] observations,” and this was certainly true for this project (Bernard 2011: 266). A worship service is designed to create a religious experience, and participant observation is really the only way to begin to understand the impact of such an experience.

To supplement the data gathered through participant observation, I interviewed six members of the congregation, including the pastor. All names mentioned in this paper were pseudonyms. All of these were formal, semi-structured interviews (Bernard 2011: 157-158). While I had hoped to conduct more interviews, many members who agreed to an interview did not respond when I attempted to follow up and schedule an interview, or had to cancel at the last minute. Most of the people I reached were contacted through snowball sampling; at the end of each interview, I asked if they knew of other members who might be interested in participating in this project (Bernard 2011: 147-150). Even though I

was unable to interview as many people as I had originally intended, the six interviews I conducted provided highlights and clarity to the data gathered through participant observation.

Religious Origins

Most Unitarian Universalist congregants were not raised in the tradition. They have usually been raised Christian, most often protestant, denominations. For many, religion was a prominent feature of their childhood, and more often than not, the experience was positive. Then, as some point, usually in adolescence or early adulthood, they leave their religion of origin, due to significant theological or political differences. They usually embark on a period of religious exploration, and come across Unitarian Universalism when they start a family, often at least in part to provide a religious experience for their children similar to the one they valued growing up.

Richard's story is fairly typical of a UU congregant. He was raised in an Episcopalian church. He describes the experience of growing up in a church as something he appreciated. When asked what specifically he valued about it, he responds:

I valued things like their pancake suppers, and the fact that I was part of a larger community. That there were adults in the community that helped raise me. And I valued exposure to religion, even though I ended up not accepting it all, I was still grateful that I was exposed to it, and went through the thought process of accepting and not accepting some of it. And became literate in religion and what its real purpose is, which I think is just to kind of figure out what the meaning of my life is.

A lot of what he valued about his religious experience as a child, the community, the search for meaning, and the process of discerning what was true, were things he

later found in a UU congregation. He talks about exploring a UU church while he was in graduate school as a young adult, but eventually “becoming a member,” and committing to a congregation, when he got married and had children. This was largely because of the many aspects of the religious experience he had growing up as a child that he wanted to give to his own children.

Luke’s story is similar to Richard’s. Growing up in a Presbyterian family, he talks about the way he began to doubt the dogma of the church from a very young age, through the way his father interacted with the religion. While his mother was a devout believer, he describes her as a “Jesus is her friend” kind of person, Luke sensed from his father that “he didn’t really quite buy into everything he was hearing.” Yet, despite this, his father still attended church regularly, was involved in the governance and activities of the congregation, and maintained a high level of Biblical literacy. Luke said that he was “intrigued by his [father’s] knowledge and skepticism at the same time.” Like his father, Luke enjoyed attending church as a child; he found the hymns and some of the sermons to be impactful and meaningful. However, once he arrived a college, he stopped going to church. He describes the process of leaving the Presbyterian church as relatively natural and uneventful; since he was no longer living at home, he was no longer attending the church he was raised in, and since he disagreed with the Christian dogma, he didn’t feel compelled to find another church to attend. His departure was not dramatic, or sudden. He spent much of his young adult life in a phase of unattached, spiritual exploration, before settling down a UU church when he started a family. He said that he went mostly for his children to have the experience growing up, but ended up staying.

Luke and Richard's stories are similar ways, both in their religious upbringing and the reasons for leaving. Neither spoke of a profound negative experience that prompted them to leave, or of overwhelming political differences. For both of these men, they're reasons for leaving their religion of origin were purely surrounding theological differences. They did not believe the dogma that their religions were offering. These stories are different from those that Brooke and Sally shared with me, who held theological but also political differences. They also felt that identities they carried were marginalized by their religions of origin.

Brooke was raised in a Catholic church. She describes her father as "strongly Catholic," and stated that Catholicism went back in her family for generations. She attended Catholic services twice a week, as well as Catholic school, until she reached high school. When she reached high school, she transferred to a public school, and stopped going to church, stating that there were "things that didn't work for [her] about Catholicism." Like Richard and Luke, she embarked on a period of religious exploration in young adulthood; she took a class in college on eastern religions and attended a Baha'i gathering. Then, around the time she was pregnant with her oldest child, a friend from college introduced her to Unitarian Universalism. While she doesn't explicitly connect the reason she began attending the UU congregation with a desire to raise her children in a religious community, she did also begin attending when she had children. She certainly holds theological disagreements with the Catholic church, similar to Luke and Richard. When asked what she likes about Unitarian Universalism, she responded:

I love how expansive it is, how I can continue to learn and grow spiritually in just any way that works for me, and of course, the people, being surrounded by other

people who are doing the same thing. It seems like, a lot of UUs just really love religion. We've all had sort of a path where we've explored a lot of things, and, I don't know. It's a hobby. Just this weekend, I was at a conference for middle school kids, UU middle school kids, where we got a chat with each other. And one of them said something where he was raised in a faith tradition, but when he hit adolescence, he said anyone with any intellectual curiosity just isn't going to survive in a lot of those environments. So, that's how it feels like in this gathering of UUs. We all had a bit more questions than were able to be answered in these other traditions. So, that we're seekers is really good for me. It's invigorating, and freeing, and supportive.

However, when I asked Brooke what it was that "didn't work" for her about the Catholic church, her first response was not theological, but political. She said that she was opposed to their rejection of female leadership, their opposition to abortion and birth control, and the way it is centered around the male deity. She says that when she enters a Catholic church, she still has a reaction to the way they use male pronouns to refer to God. So, while she certainly rejected the rigid theological dogma of the Catholic church, she rejected it first because she felt attacked by its patriarchal values.

Sally's story begins from a place of dissatisfaction with the political views of her religion of origin. She was raised in a conservative protestant denomination in the Midwest. Intriguingly, this congregation was different from the views of her family, who she describes as "Universalist but didn't have a word for it." Her family was "very justice oriented," and held beliefs that "if there was a heaven, everyone was going, and very much lived that out." In that sense, Sally's political and theological dissatisfaction with her religion of origin are very intertwined. Because her family of origin and the religious community she grew up in were in disagreement, she was raised with that constant dissonance. So, when she arrived to

college, she wanted to create a religion that was theologically consistent. It was then that one of her professors introduced her to Unitarian Universalism, and she has been attending ever since.

Another piece that is integral to Sally's story is that she identifies as queer. Although she came out later in life, long after she had found a Unitarian Universalist congregation, a long history LGBT inclusion within the Unitarian Universalist Association are aspects of the denomination in which she takes pride, and seems to have originated as a response to the hostility queer individuals face in other Christian denominations. When asked why she believed that people in UU congregations tended to be Christians who rejected their religious tradition of origin, she responded:

Well, there's a direct correlation. I think the pain is not so much with the institution as it is with individuals who have been hurt by their faith of origin, and for a lot of those folks, it has to do with sexual orientation. They have been, you know, held scripture over, as a way of being told that they're going to hell. Our faith just finds absolutely repulsive and offensive and oppressive. And so they come with really deep wounds, where they've been told to their core that they're awful. And so communion, their version of communion, their experience of communion is going to be forever tarnished. So, we have curriculum that somebody comes to be a member, there's usually, you know, a typical pathway membership like almost any organization, but we actually have a curriculum to help people heal from other religions, you know, recognizing you may have some wounds here, so you have, just true to our theology, just looking at what your experience is, what is it that you want to bring into this religious pathway, and what is it that you want to leave behind at the door. What are the wounds that we can help heal, and what do you want to bring in? Because you don't have to throw everything out. That's ridiculous. It's your life journey.

The process of helping queer individuals to heal from religious wounds and articulate what they want from a religious experience, intentionally creating and

discerning things that are important and valuable, is one of the hallmarks of Unitarian Universalism.

While most of the congregants I talked to came from Christian backgrounds, mostly protestant, there were a few exceptions. Bonnie was raised in a Unitarian Universalist Church. However, in many ways, her journey is similar to those who were raised in protestant sects. She speaks about her parents as people who didn't really talk about God, and Sunday school as more akin to a school course than a religious experience. Looking back at her childhood, she feels as if she were raised an atheist. Her young adulthood was also marked by spiritual exploration; she said, "Unitarians are free to explore, so I explored the world of no religion. And I didn't attend church again until I was probably 29." She then returned to Unitarian Universalism because she felt like "an outsider" because she was not part of a church. Since then, she no longer identifies as an atheist, but a "spiritual humanist."

Most people I talked to spoke about Unitarian Universalism as a religion that was open to people of all religious backgrounds. However, the reality of the congregation revealed that there were very few, if any, congregants who were raised in backgrounds other than Christian. Luke spoke to this, as well as to the ways Unitarian Universalists sometimes practice other religions.

There are people, I think, would categorize themselves as Buddhist UUs or Jewish UUs or Christian UUs or Vedantic or Hindu UUs, but they tend to be people who were originally Protestant, maybe, or Catholic, or secular humanist, and who have become interested in religion. And then they find, kind of an area that they like. They like the Vedas, maybe, or Bagavadgita. They like Zen Buddhism. They kind of set up that camp within the larger umbrella of UUism

An explanation for this is that even though Unitarian Universalist would like to be open to all religions, and incorporate stories and practices from other religions,

most services are structured in a protestant way. Brooke speaks to why people who do not come from Christian backgrounds might have a different experience in

Unitarian Universalist church:

I mean, it's a lot of learning. I mean, for me, one of the reasons why I loved it so much, was because it had everything. All the visceral things that I liked about church, and none of the crap. I don't know what it would be like to [someone from a non-Christian background]. It seems like someone who comes in who's unchurched would feel uncomfortable and lost. They'd feel the opposite that I would. They'd be like, "What the hell is this stuff?" There would be a lot happening that they wouldn't understand. That's what I think. It must be different.

The only people who were raised outside of Christian traditions where an interfaith couple; the wife was Sikh and the husband was Jewish, and they came to the Unitarian Universalist church because they wanted to raise their children in a place where both their religious traditions would be respected. This couple divorced a few years ago, and they both returned to their own religious communities. Several people I interviewed mentioned this couple, unprompted. It seems that while a Unitarian Universalist church might be a compromise when trying to navigate raising children in an interfaith home, it was not really meeting the needs of either member of the couple.

Understanding the religious backgrounds of the congregants is important because it is the commonalities of their religious upbringings that provide the foundation for their religion. It is their shared Christian upbringing, in addition to their phase of religious exploration, that give their services and rituals coherence. In addition to their shared religious upbringing, the vast majority of the congregation is white, middle class, and well-educated. This bolsters their shared cultural context that provides unity, in ways that theological beliefs might not.

Sacred in Everything

When I interviewed Richard, I asked him about Unitarian Universalist beliefs. He responded that while there were not “required beliefs,” most members believe about the same things. One of these mostly shared beliefs is concerning how “everything is sacred, not just some things, but all of existence in life is sacred.” I found this idea, the belief that sacred is present in every aspect of life, to be a recurrent theme in worship services, as well as the conversations I had with members. Luke describes this process of incorporating elements of other religions, as well as secular ones, into the individual search for the sacred:

So, you could use the Old Testament if you like, Genesis, or if you like the book of Job, if you liked the Pentateuch in the Torah, you could use that. You could use the New Testament, you could use the Bagavadgita. You could use a mountain or these trees around us here. Or you could use another person who could be a teacher of yours. Or you could look up at the sky and see it there. Or you could read literature or poetry, whatever it is that points you to this ultimate reality, however you conceive of it, and which we never completely understand, that would be what you would do. You would be free and responsible and try and figure out what the answer is.

Unitarian Universalists tend to implement beliefs and practices from various religious traditions. This is evident upon entering the sanctuary. While the structure is, in a lot of ways similar to any typical Protestant sanctuary, with rows of chairs divided by a center isle with an altar at the front, and the Unitarian Universalist chalice instead of a cross, a remarkable difference is the variety of different religious symbols that are represented artistically on the walls. Colored stone pebbles form the Star of David, the Hindu Ohm sign, and other prominent religious symbols. Both Passover and Easter were acknowledged in the services on the Sunday closest to those holidays. On Passover, one of the hymns sung was

“When Israel Was In Egypt’s Land” and the Time for All Ages, involved the telling of the Passover story when Moses lead the Jews out of Israel. On Easter, a Christian representative and his son were invited to tell the Easter Story at the Time for All Ages. This congregation also hosts weekly meditation sessions.

When implementing aspects from other religious traditions, it is not important that these religious elements maintain their originally intended meaning and purpose. For example, when telling the Passover Story, it was interpreted for the children as having a broad message of fighting slavery and oppression in the world today, and cultivating gratitude for the freedom they possess. There was little regard paid to traditional rabbinical interpretations of the story, or its meaning for the Jewish people. This reflects the authority given in Unitarian Universalism to the individual to create their own meaning from any religious symbol they see fit. The uniformity of the shared protestant culture gives legitimacy to these appropriations.

Sacred meaning can be gleaned from not only religious, but also secular, sources. For example, secular music is often integrated into the service along side hymns. Featured music has included “Landslide” by Stevie Nicks and “Imagine” by John Lennon. Preference is given to neither the traditional religious music, nor to the secular music. Incorporations of the secular, especially that which is as pervasive and as easily accessible popular music, reinforce the idea of finding the sacred in everything, and empower the individual members to discern for themselves where they find meaning or transcendence in any area of their life.

A ritual and symbolic representation of the search for the sacred in everything is demonstrated in the chalice. Each Unitarian Universalist service, and

usually meetings or gatherings, begins by lighting the chalice. A different member of the congregation is invited to light the chalice each week, and to do so is an honor. The chalice itself is embedded with history and symbol. Richard explained to me that it was first adopted during World War II as a sign for a Unitarian relief organization that operated an underground railway to help people in Nazi countries, who might have otherwise been sent to concentration camps, escape to safety. Thus, it represented salvation, and signifies that “no matter who you are, you’re welcome here with us.” In addition to its rich and profound history, the elements of the chalice also represent elements of the Unitarian Universalist tradition; the bowl represents community, and it evokes the image of a Christian cross, but off-center, which is representative of the Christian heritage from which Unitarian Universalism stems. Most importantly, perhaps, is the flame, which Richard defined for me as follows:

The flame represents the light inside each of us. The spark which includes our own authority. It’s inside, it’s our conscience, our reason. It’s the things we don’t even know that are inside of us. It’s the spark, of some would say God or divinity, or whatever, that’s in there.

The flame of the chalice, which is such a central symbol in the Unitarian Universalist service, is representative of what gives every person authority, and what makes every person sacred. Furthermore, all of the intentional symbolism imbedded in the chalice is reflective of a church that defines for itself what is meaningful, what is sacred. Unlike symbols in other religions, none of the symbolic elements of the chalice are given meaning through divine or supernatural decree; they are sacred and meaningful because the people of the Unitarian Universalist organization decide they are so.

Though the ritual lighting of the chalice is now present in most Unitarian Universalist congregations nationwide, it was originally developed by the laity, not the clergy. Sally described how this ritual began:

The women's group would light a chalice, well, they'd light a candle in the middle of a circle. A great many people have done that. Then the youth started. They're like, well, that's kind of interesting, look at that. We'll put a chalice in the middle and light it. And, slowly, it went out. And that's what we are. It's homegrown, and we watch, and as a strategist, I watch for the ideas that have legs among the people. I don't look for a top down. I usually never works. I've tried, like "Oh, I've got a good idea. Let's get this going." No. It's almost always from the people, and then it took off. It's only then, you'll find a chalice in every single one of our congregations, from even a tiny fellowships and meeting groups, to the big congregations, but it's only been pretty secure for the last twenty years.

Another source of the sacred is through natural elements. Often, nature is incorporated into rituals. For example, during the sharing of Joys and Sorrows, stones are dropped into a bowl every time something is shared. Two other prominent Unitarian Universalist rituals are the flower communion and the water communion. In addition, hiking and outdoor activities are common church community builders. Ritually, interactions with nature tend to be very tangible; members get to hold a stone or a flower as part of a ceremony. This emphasizes the importance of individual interactions with the sacred, however it is defined.

Resistance to the Word "God" and Tension Around Defining a Higher Power

To return to the previously mentioned story, concerning telling the Passover story during the Time for All Ages, another intriguing aspect of Unitarian Universalism that made an appearance during this time was the resistance to saying the word "God." As the pastor was telling this story, he made a slight revision by

saying that “if Moses had been a Unitarian Universalist, he might have said that the transformative power of the universe told him to tell Pharaoh to ‘Let my people go!’”

This was when I began to notice that people were quite resistant to saying the word “God.” They would use other phrases: the divine, of all that is, life force, flow. When they do use the word “God,” it is almost always followed with a qualifier. “I felt the presence of God, or the divine, or whatever you want to call it.” Richard offered the following explanation for this:

Sometimes, people are still wounded by the word ‘God.’ They grew up with a concept of God that was judging them and watching them all the time, and considered them essentially sinful ... it’s hard for some people to move beyond to a broader definition of that term, so they prefer not to use it.

There is certainly truth in his statement. The majority of the members of this congregation came from other Christian denominations in which they way they conceived God, or their lack of belief in God, made them feel inadequate as a religious practitioner, and unfit for participation in the religious community.

Beyond this, though, the avoidance of the word “God” seemed to reflect the importance of individual theological authority within Unitarian Universalism. There is inescapable meaning tied to language, and the members of this congregation are aware of it. Allowing members to choose for themselves the words used to define the sacred is yet another form of individual empowerment.

Despite this individual empowerment and authority, there is tension surrounding the way this specific sacred is defined, or not defined. Both Richard and Luke identified strong humanist leanings in the Unitarian Universalist Church, especially on the west coast, but they had conflicting opinions on whether this is a positive movement. On the one hand, Richard sees humanism as a significant

contributor to his personal spirituality. He indicates that it is through the Unitarian Universalist community, other human beings, that he is able to escape his own self involvement and “finding meaning and purpose in what [he’s] doing” is an essential part of the “religious quest.” In addition, he elaborates on how a lot of humanists have a hard time with “God concepts, especially the supernatural.” Essentially he has redefined the sacred as things providing meaning for this world.

On the other hand, Luke has an incredibly different perspective. While he is finds a prominent aspect of Unitarian Universalism discovering what makes life beautiful and wonderful, he sees the source of these things as something beyond the earthly and physical. He feels a tension with the humanist orientation the Unitarian Universalist Church has taken on. He attributes this shift as reflective of the secular culture, and wishes to return to a spiritual quest with an other-worldly focus.

Luke also notes that many members were drawn to the Unitarian Universalist Church because of their left leaning political beliefs, which is something I’ve heard several people mention in the congregation mention as well. While he acknowledges that this is a reality for people, he seems to wish there were more political diversity in the congregation. However, people I’ve chatted with during coffee hour list the overwhelming, and somewhat institutionally supported, liberal political environment of the Unitarian Universalist Church to be an essential part of why they enjoy the community. They find themselves uniting around political causes, such as immigration reform or LGBTQ rights, even though they are not, in theory, united by theological beliefs or dogma.

There is a significant tension surrounding beliefs and dogma. This seems reflective of a Protestant culture that this Unitarian Universalist Church cannot simply abandon. While this denomination was founded upon a strict rejection of dogma and creeds, it is around beliefs that the members have learned to unite themselves, both because of the religious communities the majority of them were raised in and the predominantly Protestant culture existing in the United States. Perhaps the resistance to saying the word “God” arises partially from the discomfort surrounding this contradiction.

Community of Non-Believers

The aspect of community is one of the significant reasons that people join the Unitarian Universalist Church. It is often something they found particularly meaningful in the church they were raised in. Richard states that this was one of the things he really valued about the Episcopalian Church he grew up in:

I valued things like their pancake suppers, and the fact that I was part of a larger community. That there were adults in the community that helped raise me.

Many of the functions he describes are incorporated into the Unitarian Universalist community. Every week, there is a wide range of community building events, including an “Adult Religious Explorations” group discussion, meditation groups, potlucks, and hikes.

As stated earlier, many members began attending a Unitarian Universalist Church when they had young children. They decided that while they did not agree with the religious dogma in which they were raised, they valued the experience of growing up in a religious community so much that it was something they wanted to

give to their children. Discerning what aspects of the religious experience they wanted to pass on to their sons and daughters is, once again, representative of the individual discernment that characterizes Unitarian Universalist values.

Community is demonstrated explicitly through ritual. For example, at the close of every service, everyone is invited to hold hands, look each other in the eye, and sing to each other:

From you I receive
And to you I give,
Forever, we share,
And from this, we live.

This is reflective of the humanist aspect of Unitarian Universalism. It is the other human beings that create the center of the religion. In addition, it is incorporated ritually, not due to divine command or inspiration, but because it is the value that the members have chosen to place at the center of their religious experience, and elevate to sacred.

Another ritual that explicitly reinforces community is the Dance of Restoration, which is performed annually. When performing this ritual, the congregation forms two concentric circles, the inner circle facing the outer circle, and everyone is given a flower. Then, the pastor of the congregation will call out a statement, presenting a difference that may exist between congregants, and the congregation responds, "It will not divide us," and everyone exchanges their flower with the person standing across from them. Some of these statements included:

"If I am black, and you are white..."
"If I am gay, and you are straight..."
"If I am homeless, and you own a home..."
"If I have papers, and you are undocumented..."
"If I am a Republican, and you are a Democrat..."

“If I am an addict, and you are not...”

Obviously, this ritual was created to reinforce community that ran deeper than identity markers. However, intriguingly, after some of the statements, usually ones surrounding political beliefs, the congregants would mutter to each other, “Well, that might divide us!” as they exchanged their flowers. This demonstrates the tension around political beliefs that exists within the congregation.

Conclusion

While Unitarian Universalists unite and identify themselves around the rejection of required beliefs and dogma, the role of belief still plays a central role in their tradition. The process of discerning and articulating theological, and often also political, beliefs is of central importance to this tradition. This becomes a communal practice through the rituals, which are structured based on the shared protestant culture that most congregants were raised in. It is these commonalities, not a shared orthodoxy, that provide religious unity, coherence, and identity to a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

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